THE TALISMAN of KUBLA KHAN

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MRS. ALFRED WINGATE

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"Jéa" By Mrs. Alfred Wingate — Crosby Lockwood

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1229-1298

By
MRS. ALFRED WINGATE

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THE TALISMAN OF KUBLA KHAN

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THE TALISMAN OF KUBLA KHAN

Word of all Life and Light,
Where God and Man unite,
  Thy fire lend,
That words, of dross burnt free,
May show Thou wast with me
  To journey's end.

THE TALISMAN OF KUBLA KHAN

Period 1229–1298

CHAPTER I

Chingiz, the Very Mighty, the Khan of all the Mongols, was dead. Like a colossus he had bestrode the greater part of Asia. Like a wind in the night time he had roared and the noise of his exploits resounded through the earth. Like a rushing wave of the sea he had swept away barriers and nations. In number his subjects were as the sands of the desert and their glory had been as the stars of heaven.

For two years all the princes and vassals, who had come from East and West to the burial of Chingiz, continued to mourn him.

Then his youngest and favourite son, Tului, who was in charge of the homeland, called a great kurultai, at which the Mongols would elect, according to their custom, a new supreme ruler. And with one voice Ogotai, the eldest son of Chingiz, was chosen, because that had been the wish of Chingiz.

Whereupon every man took the solemn oath of allegiance to Ogotai, saying, " We swear that so long as there remains of your posterity a morsel of flesh which, thrown upon the grass, will prevent the cows from eating or which, put in the fat, will prevent the dogs from taking it, we will not place on the throne a prince of any other branch."

The open flowery plain, where they had met together, was hardly large enough to contain the multitude of that immense assembly. No capital city of the Mongols had

yet been built in this place, though near by rose the ancient earthworks of the Uigur tribe, whose chief encampment was already known, from its tents of black felt, as Kara Korum.

The wide expanse of the blue and white sky stretched to far horizons, where blue and white mountains towered. The verdant pastures, the glowing blossoms, the beehive-shaped yurts, decorated with patterns of bright cloth, the painted carts, the floating banners, the lively crowds of men and animals afforded a scene so rich in colour that no pen could do it justice. Only the brush of a Persian miniature painter, some oppressed slave, who found freedom in the joy of working gold leaf, vermilion and azure to his use, could portray it.

A boy of sixteen stood idly by the entrance of an inconspicuous tent and watched the passing throngs. About his attitude there was something fine, critical and self-contained that set him apart. And yet his expression of eager interest showed an inclination to realise his fellowship with others.

Long since he had attracted the special attention of his grandfather, Chingiz.

"The words of the boy Kubilai are very weighty. Note it all of you."

Thus had Chingiz spoken on his death-bed. But his behest had been forgotten, for Kubilai, the second son of Tului, was a boy of few words and of a different character from most Mongols.

He was more comely than any of his relations. His clear, healthily tanned skin was light in colour and, instead of those oblique lidded eyes of fierce blue that Chingiz had bequeathed to the rest of the family, his were wide, dark and full of human kindness. His figure was straight and supple, and he wore a tunic of blue silk brocade, doubled over the breast and fastened on the right side, above breeches of buckskin tucked into high boots. So that the evening air might cool his brow, he held in his hand the distinguishing Botta head-dress of his race, a crown of buff-coloured plumes with three black quills at one side, set in a band of mallard's feathers. His black hair, thus

revealed, was shaved on the top of his head into the shape of a horseshoe and, otherwise left long, was rolled into plaits behind his ears, according to the prevailing fashion.

Kubilai loved all that was new and strange, in an inquiring and adventurous spirit. The variety of human types particularly interested him. But, unlike the majority of his people, he had rather the strong wish to know them better than the more general impulse to resent or to attack them.

At this kurultai he could, to the full, indulge his curiosity.

He saw venerable and stately ambassadors, who came from either end of a divided Chinese Empire under Mongol suzerainty. Some of them acknowledged the dominion of the Sung dynasty in the south; others looked to the Kin or northern dynasty, who were seeking to re-establish their power beyond the one province of Ho-nan that they still held. And, though these ambassadors differed remarkably in physique and speech, showing that they belonged to widely separate countries, they had this in common, that all used the same written language and all cherished the same democratic ideal of peace.

Again, unlike his people, Kubilai sympathised with that ideal. He believed moreover that it might be accomplished through the influence of the famous Chinese statesman, Yeliu Chutsai, who for many years had faithfully served Chingiz, and who now continued, with Ogotai, to uphold the best interests of both the Mongols and his own compatriots.

But there were many here who would work to overthrow Chutsai.

He saw princes of the late Kwaresmian Empire, that had comprised Turkestan and Persia and that had been destroyed by Chingiz. They and all other Mohammedans were under the special protection of Ogotai's favourite wife, the Empress Turakina, who hated the benevolent Chutsai.

And what a contrast these western princes afforded to the Chinese!

With their serene bearded faces, melancholy and

lascivious, their turbaned heads and their graceful figures, which the floating sleeves of gorgeous robes enhanced, they had the aspect of poisonous and exquisite flowers transplanted from a deserted garden.

Fierce warriors from the borders of Turkestan, marauding tribesmen, ready to serve any master who should prove his might, spat in the dust as they passed those weaklings.

Before their last Shah, Jelal ed din, had proved rotten to the core, the dark hillmen of the Hindu Kush had supported the failing cause. But even they were now more eager to claim alliance with the Mongols.

Besides these aliens, of whom only the Turcomans were distantly akin to his own race, Kubilai saw nomads from every part of Central Asia: Kungrad of the Royal house, who garrisoned part of the Great Wall of China; Uriankhai, the forest dwellers, keepers of reindeer and guardians of the tomb of Chingiz; Naimans from the western frontier of Mongolia; Uigurs who had the reputation of much learning, and many others.

Each tribe spoke its own language, had its own peculiar customs, boasted its own history, and all had been at war before Chingiz had united all in the pride of sharing Mongol conquest.

Distinct from them, and yet related, were the Kipchaks of the Caucasus, to whose country Juchi, the bastard, who should have been the firstborn of Chingiz, had long ago betaken himself in jealous rage. Now Juchi's son Batu (whom Kubilai recognised as a cousin since their mothers were sisters) ruled all the land north of the Caspian, where he had established his own Empire under the name of the Golden Horde. And Batu and his brothers had come to the kurultai with their families and their people, their wives and their women, their herds and their flocks, to heal old wounds by supporting Ogotai.

A great man truly was Cousin Batu, whose immense carts, laden with tents used as mosques, shops or dwellings, had traversed the steppes and the mountains like a city in motion. A great man, indeed, but not, despite his presence here, a man of peace.

A youth, who sat his horse unsteadily, approached Kubilai at a canter, and suddenly drawing rein, almost fell from the saddle.

"Hola, cousin!" he said thickly and with unnatural solemnity. "Come on with me! I go to watch a new game that the Persians are to show us. They play it with long mallets and a ball."

Kubilai grinned and shook his head. Prince Kuyuk, the son of Ogotai and of Turakina, rode on more carefully and Kubilai watched him go.

Why, he wondered, should not only Kuyuk but most other members of the Royal house, be incapable of rejoicing without becoming intoxicated? The kumiss they all drank was mild and sweet—no one liked the fermented mare's milk better than Kubilai. But why, to celebrate any event, should it be drunk from morning till night, with the result that few of them on such occasions were perfectly sober? Was success and luxury already undermining Mongol hardihood, and would this be their undoing in the end?

As he reflected thus, his two brothers, Mangu the eldest and Hulagu a boy of fifteen, rode towards him and stopped to speak. The three boys were remarkably different in appearance.

Mangu was a typical Mongol of the less aristocratic type, ugly, snub-nosed, wide-mouthed and genial. There was more fire and purpose in Hulagu's dark blue eyes and the promise of military genius in his alert expression and soldierly bearing.

"How now, brother!" said Mangu cheerily. "Do you not join in any sport? There are wrestling matches to be watched and contests of archery and horsemanship to enter."

"I have been out hawking," said Kubilai, "and that contents me."

"Our sport is poor play," said Hulagu impatiently. "There is no game like war. Pray Heaven, our uncle will plan fresh campaigns! We need them if we are not to grow soft."

" The homeland is good enough for me," said Mangu. " But there is talk that the conquest of China should be completed. Nin-kiassu, of the late northern dynasty, far from content with the title of vassal prince which our grandfather forced on him, is said already to be raising a new army against us."

" I have also heard," said Kubilai, " that the Minister Yeliu Chutsai has advised our uncle that the wind of carnage must abate. It is good advice. Why should the fame of Mongols be based only on slaughter ? "

" How should war end while we have enemies or while countries remain to be conquered ? " said Hulagu. " The Mongol Empire must be established, first in north China, then in the south."

" That is true enough," said Kubilai. " Yet the end should be peace. The Chinese themselves say that, while an army is necessary to ensure respect, war is contrary to reason."

As he spoke, another brother, Arikbuga, Tului's youngest son, joined the group. He was a vain boy with thin malicious lips, and had no love for Kubilai. Now sneering he said :

" Hark to the man of peace, who is more of a Chinese than a Mongol ! "

Kubilai met his eyes and answered composedly : " Then, perchance my future will lie in China."

" China does not interest me," went on Hulagu. " When I am grown I will go westward against Persia. I will establish the Mongol Empire there as well. These Moslems shall feel our might. Even their Khalif at Baghdad shall be overthrown."

" Good," agreed Mangu. " I will go westward too, far westward with Cousin Batu, till the wide world trembles at the name of Mongol. And when I have done that, I may go eastward, so that my name, which the Turks call ' eternal,' shall be justified."

" Mangu may mean eternal in Turkish, but in our tongue it only means silver," said Arikbuga slily. " So you are not of any great value."

He dodged the blow that Mangu aimed at him and rode on.

"I think you are not at heart so much of a warrior as the rest of us," said Hulagu to Kubilai.

Kubilai shrugged his shoulders. "I would rather construct than destroy," he said. "I would rather see our uncle build in this place a great city, where all the arts and crafts of the world will meet, than raze other cities to the ground. It is already rumoured that we shall have our capital here at Kara Korum, and that when it is supplied by skilled artisans, Mongol gentlemen shall no longer live in tents like horseherds, but in fair houses of stone. So far, the peoples we have conquered despise us and regard us as barbarians. From the Chinese, above all, we should be able to learn what is the secret of civilisation."

There was an eagerness in his tone and a light in his eyes that quelled criticism. Mangu, the genial and superficially shrewd elder brother, was incapable of understanding him. Hulagu, the belligerent and brilliant younger brother, was too engrossed in his own dreams of world conquest to be attracted by a higher ideal.

Presently both rode on, leaving Kubilai alone. But his gaze followed them wistfully, as though he desired their co-operation.

A sedan chair, borne by Chinese carriers, passed and he saw that it contained the tall figure of the statesman, Chutsai. Like a great image of porcelain, serene and splendid, the Minister sat in his robes of plum-coloured silk, over which his thin pointed beard hung down to his knees. Kubilai had bowed respectfully, but as the carriers stopped, he went forward to greet Chutsai, who alighted from the chair.

"I trust that I find the favourite grandson of the revered Chingiz in good health, though unoccupied and apart," said Chutsai, with polished courtesy.

"I thank you, sir," answered Kubilai. "I am well and hope also that your shadow will never grow less. May I invite you into my poor yurt to partake of any refreshment or to rest?"

"I am honoured by the invitation," said Chutsai formally. "In you, O prince! I have long seen a budding branch, whose quest for truth is like sap rising under the warm rays of the sun. Let us, therefore, have some converse together."

Kubilai led the way into the tent, where, before a couch covered with furs, was set a square blackwood table, laid with writing materials; a tablet of rice paper, an ink slab of jade, a block of Chinese ink and pen brushes of varying thickness. Through the smoke hole in the centre of the roof, the light fell on this table. And above the couch, where Kubilai and the Minister seated themselves, were the images of felt, which found a revered place in every Mongol dwelling and which symbolised, according to the Shamanist faith, the laws of Heaven and of Earth.

To a slave crouching in a corner, Kubilai gave an order at once to prepare tea and himself began to clear the writing materials from the table. But Chutsai stopped him.

"Study is the refreshment of the mind, O prince!" he said, with a smile. "Will you not let me share your interests?"

"I have been seeking to learn the art of your written language, sir," said Kubilai. "But I am confused by my own ignorance. If I could understand on what the great knowledge of the Chinese is founded, I could perhaps begin to realise the secret of your civilisation."

Chutsai's expression was impenetrable. His smooth yellowish face was like soft thick paper concealing all thought. His black eyes, beneath a dome-like brow, were like polished stones, but his clean, smiling mouth was whimsical as a child's.

"The secret of our civilisation lies in the principles of our faith," he said softly.

"Am I too young or too much of a barbarian to learn those principles, sir?"

"Assuredly not."

"Then tell me. I know, sir, that you are a Confucianist. Does this mean that you worship only your ancestors, or

that while, like us, you regard them as partly divine, you have, also like us, other gods ? "

" Listen," answered Chutsai gently, " listen, O prince ! and you shall understand. . . . Confucius, the Perfect Sage, who lived five hundred years before the Christ worshipped by the Nestorians, systematised, in a moral code, the antique and nameless religious cult of China. This cult demands the utmost reverence for our ancestors, who founded it and likewise originated all the benefits of our civilisation. But our reverence for our ancestors is not worship. The ancestral tablet is a sacred memorial and not a divine object. Confucius said—' To love all beings and treat them well, that is justice and equity ' and himself neglected the tomb of his parent."

" What then do the Chinese adore ? " said Kubilai.

" You shall hear," said Chutsai. " The teaching of Confucius was expounded by Mencius, who lived two hundred years later and who said, ' The heart of a child is so naturally inclined to good, that the moral ideal is for man to keep the heart of a child.' But it remained for Chu Hsi, who has been called the Great Master and who has not long been dead, to restore the ethical code to its pure foundation. The teaching of Chu Hsi is the flower of Confucianism. It has been called materialism, but the heart of a child can judge that it is far from that."

He paused as they were served with tea and there was silence while they drank it from bowls of fine pottery.

Then Chutsai said slowly : " The Chinese, like the Mongols, worship as Heaven the Origin of All Things. No mortal mind can know this Origin, which is therefore the Mystery. But mortal minds are aware that the Mystery works in two ways. By Its energy it produces all positive force or ether. And when energy reaches a limit, perfect stillness ensues and produces negative force or ether. In this state the Origin appears as the End of All Things : equally the Mystery. When perfect stillness reaches a limit, energy returns. Thus appears the turning of the wheel, or the revelation of the Two Modes."

" Then the Chinese do not, like the Mongols, give any

form to Heaven ? " said Kubilai, with a glance at his own grotesque image of felt.

" The Mystery is without form," said Chutsai. " It is Natural Law, which we call Li, and it is also the Way or Moral Law, which we call Tao. Its Two Modes of revelation are always in opposition one to the other. They are positive and negative, light and darkness, heavenly and earthly, male and female, the whole line and the divided line—everything indeed which has its counterpart. And this is called Yin and Yang, which follow each other in endless succession and give us perpetual change or flux. Behold, this is how we portray Yin and Yang."

With a few deft strokes of a pen brush, Chutsai painted on the tablet of rice paper a diagram.

" I have seen that design on Chinese works of art, without knowing its meaning," said Kubilai.

" You can see now," said Chutsai, " that each Mode is of the shape of an embryo, the earliest form of Life. Each Mode also contains the germ of the other. In light there is a point of darkness, in darkness a point of light. Positive and negative, heavenly and earthly, male and female are equally balanced."

" Does everything follow that rule ? "

" Everything ; even the nature of man. Mankind derives from the Mystery not only his vital spark but also his intelligence ; not only Li, the Natural Law, but also Tao, the Moral Law. In the wide space of the sky above the earth, the Mystery works to communicate Itself to all terrestrial forms. In that great gulf there is nothing but energy and peace. Hence the reason why the Mystery, using the Azure Vault as the centre of control, is worshipped as Heaven."

"This seems a wise and simple faith," said Kubilai. "Surely, sir, if all men understood it, there would be no more discord."

"There need be no discord," said Chutsai. "Moral Law pervades the universe. If the Natural Law reigned alone, we should have perpetual and apparent warfare—all things in direct opposition to each other. We recognise that reality. But we also recognise another fact, the control of Moral Law, the evidence of which is the harmony and stability of the cosmos and the ideal aspirations of humanity. Even you, O prince, in desiring knowledge, show a characteristic that distinguishes man above all other forms of life. And that characteristic may yet show you how to live according to the principle, Jên."

"Is that principle the secret of civilisation, sir?"

"It is no secret," answered Chutsai, with his subtle smile. "The Word, Jên, is present everywhere. To find it, we need only look within our hearts. The nature of man is a combination of the two laws, which he possesses completely from birth in his heart. It is the seat of his consciousness and it is entirely good, though it is often clouded by the physical element, which is the source of all evil. The stream may be muddy because of its channel, but the water in itself is clear. Man's own nature will reveal to him the Word, lying like a pearl, under the water."

"A pearl of great price," said Kubilai, "worth more than all our Mongol possessions."

"There are three rules for self-culture, by which man may develop his nature," said Chutsai. "Be discriminating and simple. Hold fast the true mind by not allowing the doings of the day to fetter and destroy the natural goodness of the virtuous mind. Develop the mind to the utmost by inquiry and investigation."

"I will seek, sir, to follow those rules."

"And when through them you have found Jên," said Chutsai, "recognise it, O prince! for what it means. It is not only the flame that is called love, not only the gratification that is called beneficence, not only the grace

that is called pity. But it has all these qualities together and more. For it is the Mystery Itself, translated into terms of human understanding. It is the Word which unites man to his fellows and to all other terrestrial forms in appropriate relationship. And thus it also unites man to Heaven."

The mask seemed to drop from Chutsai's face as he spoke, showing it ennobled by such perfect wisdom and such lofty purpose that Kubilai, with the confidence of the young, felt he could rely for ever on that Truth.

"Sir," he said, "I must go to your country, where this Word belongs."

"It is the foundation of all creeds and may belong to all people," said Chutsai. "And I have told it to you because, through you, it will surely add glory to the Mongol Empire, which I have served to the best of my ability. Keep it ever in your mind, O prince! whose virtue Chingiz was great enough to see. I will show you how to write the Chinese character Jên, so that you may always know it."

Kubilai took a pen brush and Chutsai guided its strokes on the tablet of rice paper, first to form the ideograph for man and then the double horizontal lines that signify two.

"It is so simple, O prince! and yet it means so much. Man and two together make the compound word, Jên, which is the right relationship of man to his fellows. Man cannot live alone. He is responsible and also dependent. Jên comprises his duty and his immortality. It is sacrifice and it is self-realisation. It is the complete and final revelation of the Two Modes."

CHAPTER II

A YEAR later young Kubilai went to China with the Mongol armies, led by his uncle Ogotai Khan and his father Tului. The Kin dynasty, which had once held the whole northern empire, was now seeking re-establishment and had finally to be crushed.

With all the pomp and panoply of war, the mighty Mongol forces set forth. Ahead went their ancient standard, embroidered with rampant wolves and hung with nine white yak tails. After it rode the mounted warriors, their decimal units bound by an iron discipline. The rhythmical tread of horses, their occasional snuffling breaths or sharp whinnyings and the jingle of their harness mingled with the creak of heavy wagons, drawn by bullocks and laden with tents or siege engines. The whole host moved in an atmosphere redolent of horse flesh, leather and wool, like one predatory pack of wild animals, running freely towards its prey.

Once more they traversed the wide and desolate extent of the great Gobi Desert. Once more they burst into the Chinese provinces of Shan-si and Shen-si, taking many towns that had been reoccupied by their old enemies and laying waste many fertile valleys.

It was Kubilai's first actual experience of war and all the military instincts of his forbears rose to relish it. This, he felt, was Life in its fullest aspect: Life moving hand in hand with Death according to the Natural Law, when that Law alone is apparent.

Ho-nan, the Central Flowery Kingdom of the Chinese, remained the stronghold of the Kin and was therefore the main point of attack. But the approach to Ho-nan, from north or west, was protected by the most notable fortress

of the Kin, in the impregnable Tung Kwan Gorge, where the Yellow River makes its great eastward bend and unites with the Wei River between precipitous cliffs. Consequently Tului would lead the offensive in a strategic movement from the south and Kubilai would share the great adventure.

They left behind, with Ogotai in Shen-si, their horses and wagons and took an antique, historically famous, military road, paved with stone and cut into wide steps, so that they had to proceed on foot. This wonderful road, a supreme engineering feat, was constructed on timber corbels inserted in the yellowish-coloured cliffs of the country. As they trod it, they passed blue-clothed labourers pushing wheelbarrows that carried women, children and property. They saw sedan chairs in which rode impassive Chinese grandees, like carven images. And they saw trudging peasants, apparently unaffected by the issues of any human war, intent only on a greater conflict with Nature.

But no animals did they see, though the towering cliffs took on the forms of brooding frozen monsters and the long road stretched on before them like a writhing serpent. The bow-legged Mongol soldiers, centaurs robbed of their equine strength, found the steep march irksome. So Kubilai, a stripling proud to share the hardest trials of his men, cheered them on with song and story.

"When Chingiz, the god-like,
Led his people to war,
His horse was his comrade,
All other friends before.
Ha!
When we prove our right,
We shall ride again as he did!

"Yessagai Bahadur,
On his good horse astride,
Saw Hoelun and took her
And made her then his bride.
Ha!
When we win that right,
We shall ride again as he did!"

And so back through their history till they remembered.

"The sunlight of Heaven
Loved Alan Goa's grace,
It came as on horseback
And they founded our race.
Ha!
When our fame shines bright,
We shall ride again as swiftly!"

On they went, still following the great road, till in the neighbouring province of Ssu-chuan, the Land of the Four Streams, yellowish-coloured cliffs gave place to red sandstone, cut into deep branching gorges and valleys by rapid and unfordable watercourses.

Never had Kubilai seen such a country. It was like some fantastic dream picture, bold brush strokes of red and black on a shimmering silver background. The road wound upwards in zigzags cut in the solid rock and seemed to melt into its surroundings. Across the dark valleys shreds of cloud drifted. Overhead the pale sky stretched to dim purple horizons.

If this were war, thought Kubilai, when every day muscles grew harder, hopes rose higher and comradeship became firmer, then long might war continue and surely he had over-rated peace.

They left the main road at last and, skirting the frontier of the Sung or southern dynasty, who had made, in self-interest, an alliance with the Mongols, but who could not be trusted, they came into southern Ho-nan. The Kin forces rushed to oppose them and Kubilai had his first taste of serious battle. Tului's army, wearied by its long march, suffered a set back and sustained some loss.

Kubilai's blood was fired by the reverse. Seeing his men fall, his brothers in arms defeated, he longed to revenge them. None were more eager than he to go on with all speed and join forces with Ogotai, on the west bank of the Yellow River, above the Tung Kwan Gorge.

Then the Mongol armies converged on an important

city called Kai-chau, which was defended by the Kin with the utmost heroism, but which ultimately fell. The commander of the garrison was brought into the Mongol camp and summoned to appear before Ogotai and his generals. Surrounded with armed guards, he yet seemed superior to all, so dignified was his pose and so lofty his mien.

"O Khan, this man refuses to submit or to sue for terms of peace! What shall be done to him?"

"First force him to kneel in my presence," thundered Ogotai.

They tried to press him down, but he resisted with all the strength of his powerful frame and with a smile of utter disdain.

A murmur, half of rage, half of admiration, rose from every Mongol present.

Then, to end the unseemly struggle, a soldier had recourse to a deed still more unseemly. He struck at the legs of the Chinese general with his sword.

"This shall at least make you kneel," he shouted.

But the Chinese deliberately rolled over on to his side, with his back to Ogotai and, as he lay there bleeding to death, the disdainful smile never left his lips.

Kubilai rushed forward, knelt on the ground and supported the fallen man in his arms. His face was as crimson with shame as the cloth with which he attempted to staunch the flow of blood.

He looked round at last and exclaimed: "Are we savages, to treat a prisoner of war, a great gentleman, thus?"

The appeal to Mongol generosity was so potent, that every man cried aloud: "Illustrious warrior, if ever you return to life, range yourself with us!"

After which they gave the dead Chinese general honourable burial and when, according to their custom, they feasted long and lavishly to celebrate their victory, they toasted his name in kumiss.

But young Kubilai went out from that feast and raised his eyes to the serene and starry sky and thought: "Is this

indeed war? Not splendid Life and noble Death, moving hand in hand, not endurance and fellowship, but cruelty and destruction, most base and meaningless."

He was to learn much more of war.

After three months more of fierce but desultory fighting, when Tung Kwan the impregnable was surrendered, Ogotai and Tului retired with half their armies to the homeland. But young Kubilai stayed to see the end of the campaign with the veteran Mongol general, Subotai the Valiant, who had so ably fought for Chingiz and who was now aided by his own son, Uriankgadai.

K'ai-fêng Fu, the southern capital of the Kin Emperor Nin-kiassu, was invested and a siege even more terrible than that by which Chung Tu, the central capital, had long ago been lost, now began.

So terrific was the contest, that in sixteen days the united death roll numbered thousands. Within the great walled city, the Chinese losses were further augmented by the ghastly sequels of epidemic, civil riot and famine.

Then Nin-kiassu escaped to rouse the country. No sooner was he gone than rebellion, headed by an usurper, broke forth openly and the city yielded. Subotai entered the stricken place and would have fulfilled its destruction, but that a command to spare the remainder of the inhabitants was suddenly brought by runners from Ogotai.

The urgent case had been reported to the homeland by Kubilai, who was in correspondence with his old friend the Chinese Minister, Yeliu Chutsai, and that wise man was still the principal adviser of Ogotai.

"War is certainly contrary to all reason," wrote Kubilai. "It is also far from that principle of which you, dear sir, told me once—the secret of civilization. And yet the right relationship of man to his fellows, expressed in one word and present as I have seen in discipline, must prevail now, or there is no virtue in our cause."

He wrote again later: "Our allies, the Sung, will surely be as faithless to us as they have been to their old suzerains, the Kin. Nin-kiassu has invited their help in vain, quoting

the Chinese proverb, 'When the lips are gone, the teeth are no longer protected from the cold.' By this he means that the maintenance of his own power stands between the Sung and their own ultimate destruction. With Sung auxiliaries, we are now besieging the city in which Nin-kiassu has taken shelter. There is a deep lake near the city, in which a fierce dragon is said to dwell and guard a fortified tower. We are to drain the lake and discover whether this is true."

He was prepared to find it true and was almost disappointed when no dragon was forthcoming. Meanwhile the defenders of the city, reduced by hunger to desperate straits, were boiling every object of leather they possessed for food and even making a ghastly broth of human bones and vegetables. The Mongols and southern Chinese, having taken the fortified tower of the lake, began to attack the main walls of the town.

And still the Emperor and his suite, disdaining death, disdaining even despair, conserved the rules of propriety. Decorously, without haste or passion, Nin-kiassu signed a formal deed of abdication, in favour of his only son.

"You, child, may escape. To ride I am too stout. The time has come for me to lay aside authority as the Son of Heaven and to retire to the company of my ancestors."

"I shall not survive you, O my father!" said the young prince, bowing low.

"We shall not survive you, Son of Heaven," said the chief minister and the principal generals with one voice, prostrating themselves on the ground.

Nin-kiassu entered a house, against the walls of which straw and brush-wood were piled, presently to be ignited. He ascended the outer staircase of carved and painted wood and came into a raftered room, where all his ancestral tablets were ranged on an altar. Before this altar stood two vases of bronze, bearing gold lacquered flowers, two candlesticks, holding triangular-shaped candles of red wax, decorated with dragons, and one central incense burner,

from which rose a melancholy and penetrating perfume. He bowed three times facing the altar and said :

" Revered ancestors, hail ! Every five years do I salute the memory of you all, thus assembled, lest somewhere one amongst you, of the earliest times, may survive. Otherwise, in the temple, I have done honour regularly and on all occasions to the last six and to the founder of our family. I have summoned their separate souls, the superior from the regions of space by the sound of sweet music, the inferior from the earth and the tomb by the odour of wine poured in libation."

Thereupon he took from a table a reed instrument and blew on it a few such plaintive and haunting notes, that the sound seemed indeed to call celestial, invisible presences to descend and join his company. And when he had done this, he took a cup of wine and poured it out solemnly before the altar. And the bitter-sweet perfume of the wine, mingling with the scent of the incense and spreading through the room, seemed indeed to call, from vast depths, the ghostly forms of long dead revellers.

Then Nin-kiassu prostrated himself and said :

" You are here. I feel that you are surrounding me. I know that your benevolent eyes are regarding me. If sand were strewn upon the floor, I would have the felicity of seeing your footsteps. Beloved and honoured, permit me, the last of our house, to join your company. But first, that all may be in order and according to the rules of propriety, let me observe the procedure that should follow my decease."

He rose and with reverence removed one of the tablets at the top of the rank to a lower position and then replaced it with a new tablet, engraved with his own name and titles, that he drew from the sleeve of his robe.

" No one will make offerings to my memory or to yours," he said ; " but we shall sleep together in peace."

Then, decently and with dispatch, he hanged himself with his silken girdle from one of the rafters.

And the flames of the burning house consumed his body and all the tablets upon the altar.

So ended, not ingloriously, the dynasty of the Kin, which had reigned for one hundred and eighteen years.

Kubilai was now recalled to the homeland by the death of his father. In this event there was something strange and worthy of note.

Ogotai had fallen ill from excessive drinking and was not expected to recover. The Shamans recited their incantations at his bedside and prepared a brew of kumiss in a great bowl, which was hardly what Ogotai required, but which was calculated to effect a cure by being imbued with magic qualities.

Tului, who loved his elder brother, thrust the exorcists aside and, raising the wooden vessel that contained the consecrated liquor, prayed with the utmost sincerity: "Great God, Eternal Being, if Thou punishest according to man's guilt, Thou knowest that I am more culpable than he! I have killed more people in war; I have harried more women and children; I have made more tears to flow from fathers and mothers. If Thou summonest one of Thy servants because of his beauty and merit, I still claim to be more worthy. Take me in the place of Ogotai and make his disease pass into me!"

So saying he drained the potent draught.

And, whether Heaven was touched by the naïve appeal, so typical of those qualities in Tului that had made him, despite all his faults, the favourite of Chingiz, or whether Ogotai was saved by forced sobriety and Tului drank too deep, the fact remains that Ogotai recovered and Tului died soon after at the early age of forty.

When Kubilai, a man of eighteen, tempered by the trials of war, returned from China for the funeral obsequies of his father, he was twitted by his brothers for returning alone.

"How now, little Kubilai," said Mangu, "were none of the Kin princesses beautiful? You, who admire so much the manners and customs of the Chinese, should surely have brought back a bride! Or was there one

lady, fairer than any, who repelled your advances, calling you perchance a barbarian ? "

"Nay," answered Kubilai calmly, "I did not lust after any woman. I have seen many and they are very delicate and fine. They are dressed richly in silk and their faces are painted with red and white, so that they resemble pictures. I would as soon have forced myself on one of them as I would despoil one of their own works of art."

"Hark to little Kubilai!" jeered Arikbuga. "How gentle war has made him! Chingiz, the Very Mighty, had no such scruples."

"I shall never be a great conqueror like our grandfather. What do my words matter? I am only a younger son. Yet I may love as well as Chingiz and learn better than he did the secret of civilization."

"Now he speaks in riddles like the Chinese! See how he has caught their manner! Drop these pretensions, brother! Get a horse and be a Mongol."

"I shall at least seek a Mongol wife," said Kubilai dispassionately, and silenced criticism by riding forthwith to the camp of the Kungrad tribe and proposing himself as a prospective bridegroom.

From this tribe, the oldest and proudest blood in all Mongolia, had come Grandmother Bortai, the first and only love of Chingiz. Her power had raised the status of her people still further. It was to the Kungrad that the whole Imperial family now looked for marriages that should cement their might. Kubilai was therefore doing the right, the conventional thing, in seeking among them a wife. His sympathies might be Chinese, but his instincts were evidently Mongol.

The Kungrad people said to him: "Which of our maidens will you buy, lord? There are many who are comely and, if one pleases you more than another, she shall be mounted on a swift horse and you, likewise mounted, shall pursue her and make her yours."

Kubilai, knowing that this was the marriage custom, laughed and answered that he would take his time in

finding a bride to suit him. But, though he was critical, he did not long delay.

To escape prolonged feasting on the evening of his arrival, he walked out from the camp to the summit of a bare hillside.

The season was early summer and the air was pure and sweet with the scent of wild flowers, like the breath of a child. In a clear sky that showed as yet no shade of night, a crescent moon waited to shine. The hour was still and filled with a most tender spirit.

Where the ground dipped again to a hollow, in which a water spring bubbled, Kubilai suddenly observed the figure of a young girl crouching on the ground. Hearing her speak, he approached closer, but she was so occupied and intent that she did not look up.

He saw now that she was leaning over an iron trap, from which she was trying to set free a struggling mountain hare, caught by one leg.

"Patience, little brother, patience!" she was saying. "I am your friend! If you escape with one leg missing, you will only fall a victim to a beast stronger and swifter than yourself. Stay, I will hold you with one hand and, with the other, force a stone between the teeth of the trap!"

While she accomplished the difficult task, Kubilai, standing a little way above her, watched her with pleasure and interest.

Her thick plaits of black hair fell on either side of a flushed and beautiful little face, lit with protective love. Kindness shone in that face, like dew in the cup of a blossom. She was more serious than most Mongol maidens. Her dark eyes, with their slanting lids, were grave and innocent and her red lips were made for soft smiles rather than for merry laughter.

Her dress, a tunic of red silk embroidered with gold and green threads, above full breeches of black cloth, became her tall and slender figure well. Her feet in high boots of brown buckskin were small and shapely; her hands were fine and sensitive.

At last, with the liberated hare in her arms, she examined its injured leg, leant her cheek against its fur and continued to murmur consoling words.

Then Kubilai spoke.

"If that is your little brother, what will the big brothers say when they find the trap empty?"

Startled she met his amused glance and held the hare closer.

"If the big brothers discover what I have done," she said gravely, "they will surely beat me. But I would rather suffer that, than leave one little soul in torment."

"You speak strangely. Animals must die that men may live."

"Man can live on curd and kumiss. Our good mares give their milk willingly. Wars have been won without eating meat."

"In extremity it may be foregone, but not for long. Who are you, and who taught you this odd opinion?"

"I am Jambui of the Kungrad clan. And what I speak is the law of the Buddha, who lived many ages ago in a foreign land."

Kubilai came down and sat beside her. As he did so, she opened her arms and let the hare go free. It sprang forward, dragging its wounded leg, paused for a moment, lying low, looked back, then loped slowly away.

"I would not have abused your law by hurting it," said Kubilai. "I have heard of the Buddhists. Their Bonzes come amongst us and quarrel with our Shamans. But I have never listened to their teaching. Some of them may be good and wise men."

"Assuredly," she said, "for they live according to the Law and the Order of the Lord Sakya Muni. He showed that we mortals are all one family and that thus we should live together in peace and good fellowship."

"Ay, that is the Word of Truth," said Kubilai. "That is man in the right relationship to his fellows."

"Are not the animals also our fellows?" she said.

"In the eyes of a horse or a dog," he answered, "I

have often observed a soul, promising fidelity and asking in return no more than good faith."

"To understand," she said, "is to awaken from the great dream, to come out of the shadows into the light. What living beings are not our fellows?"

The peace of the evening encompassed them. And in that peace there was the sense that they were surrounded by a host of mortal forms, seeking self-expression and unity; the forms of stone and root and leaf, of flowers, of birds, even of insects hidden in the turf. The same life flowed through all these forms. Its manifestation was the same harmony.

Kubilai gazed at the maiden who sat beside him, her slender hands folded in her lap, her dark eyes shining softly. It seemed to him that he had never seen any one so lovely and so kind. He longed to draw closer to her, to escape through her the sense of his own insignificance.

"Oh! Jambui, we people are very small."

"Apart we are small, but together we are great and immortal."

"I am not great, Jambui. No empire will ever be mine. Even my younger brothers laugh at me and call me little Kubilai."

"The empires of the world do not last, Kubilai. There is nothing else but Love."

He put his arm around her.

"You are like no one else, Jambui. Take and teach me further. I love you well and you shall rule me always. . . ."

When the sky darkened, they went slowly together back across the hillside to the camp.

CHAPTER III

KUBILAI took his young wife home to his mother, who approved his choice and gave Jambui heart-whole welcome.

Tului's widow was a Nestorian Christian, having long since learnt that faith at the court of her father, Wang Khan of the Keraits, far famed in his time as the mythical potentate Prester John. Kubilai, like his father, was a Shamanist and Jambui was a Buddhist. But no differences of faith prevented this simple home from being a peaceful and happy one. For in it, each of these three lived for the other in the most natural and tender of human relationships.

Arikbuga, the conceited youngest son, had gone westward to seek adventure on the borders of Mongolia.

Hulagu, next in age, the truculent born soldier, had gone farther westward with one of Ogotai's generals, against Khorassan, Mesopotamia and Armenia, but not yet actually against the Khalif at Baghdad.

And Mangu, the eldest, the typical Mongol, had started to go farthest west of all on that great European campaign, by which his people have been chiefly remembered and generally anathematised. With Mangu went Kuyuk, the son of Ogotai, and Subotai the Valiant, ablest commander of his age, recalled from continued offensive against the treacherous southern Chinese, who, having seen the downfall of the Kin, had turned against their allies.

Part of Mangu's ambitions was now realised. The army of the homeland joined the forces of Batu Khan of the Golden Horde. They converged on Russia and, after Kieff was captured, the wide world trembled at the name of Mongol. Kubilai heard later how his brother Mangu had been responsible for the taking of that famous city,

Kieff. He heard also what had happened there and thus received his first insight on western civilisation.

For Kieff was then one of the greatest towns of Europe, a mart of commercial enterprise frequented by the Greek and Italian merchants of Byzantium. It was magnificently situated on the high banks of the river Dnieper and its white walls and its lovely gardens gave it the aspect of a place pictured in a fairy tale. Its thirty splendid churches were surmounted with golden cupolas, which shone with such dazzling effect that the Mongols had given it the name of Altan Dash, the Court of the Golden Heads. The wealth of its prelates and its nobles was enormous. The sanctity of its glittering altars and of its jewelled crosses seemed to forbid the approach of the barbarian.

Yet the dark eastern host came on with a noise like thunder. And, as the terrified people cried aloud in the streets, this thunder, made up of the tread of many horses and the rumbling of many waggons, drowned the voice of Kieff. The walls were soon breached and the inhabitants sought refuge in their churches. When these were filled within, the people, believing that only here would the arm of God be strong to save, began to congregate on the flat roof of one of the sacred buildings. They took with them all their possessions and valuables—not only their money, but their furniture and even their animals.

But, as more and more devout souls climbed up, those already on the roof tried to thrust them back, uttering shouts of warning.

"The roof will not bear the weight! It will break! Little Mother, remove your beehives! Uncle Petrovitch, drop your bag of wheat."

"Christ loves my bees more than your gold!"

"The Blessed Virgin doth not despise a poor man's food!"

"Christ, pity us! Mary, save us! Saints and angels, defend us."

So shrieked and sobbed the crowd, continuing their ascent. Till suddenly another sound cut short their

clamour, a dreadful sound of splitting timber and cracking cement.

Those perched precariously on the edge of the roof jumped to the street below and met a swift and merciful death, or were crippled and taken prisoners. The rest, herded close together, incapable of movement, went down as though on a foundering ship, burying all within the church.

And even the Mongols paused in their work of destruction to wonder at that cataclysm, to listen to that wail of despair, to watch that cloud of rising dust below which tortured forms still struggled.

Kieff, the holy, the majestic was erased. Not one stone was left upon another and, when it was rebuilt, it was only as a shadow of its former splendour.

This story reached the homeland with reports of further Mongol success.

But Kubilai's experience of war in China, with its greater area than the whole of Europe, could not show him how widely spread was the terror of the West.

Here no secret of civilisation prevailed, subtle enough for individual resignation or strong enough for united resistance. Here only the hopeless prayer rose from every Christian church: "From the fury of the Mongols, Good Lord deliver us!" while the Papal See and the Holy Roman Empire plotted against each other. Here, as the Mongols overran the great kingdom of Hungary, established themselves there and swept on towards Vienna, panic possessed the entire continent.

And yet here the instinct for trade survived, like a seed that would germinate to far-reaching results.

In Venice, Mistress of the Adriatic, merchant princes dreaded the ruin of their property in Constantinople, Queen of Cities, as they had never dreaded the depredations of piratical Greeks or jealous Genoese. The noble family of the Polos, at home equally in Venice and in Constantinople, consulted together with bated breath as to the outcome of the Tartar invasion.

Andrea Polo, of the parish of San Felice, thought the

danger would pass. His cousin, of the parish of San Geremia, was not so sanguine.

" When my three sons are grown to manhood, you will see," said Andrea the optimist, " trade will be re-established and will flourish. Not for nothing do we bear the sign of three jackdaws on our escutcheon. The polo (jackdaw) is a bold bird and knows how to snatch at fortune."

But Kubilai, who looked wonderingly towards the West and remembered how his grandfather Chingiz had told him that thence would come three birds of black plumage, to bring him great renown, knew nothing as yet of European enterprise.

Meanwhile Ogotai Khan proceeded with the building of his new capital city, Karakorum, and summoned the most skilled artisans of China and Persia to fulfil his object.

Beyond the city wall that surrounded the main streets, fine houses were erected and, when in one of these Kubilai's first son was born, he made a little song for his lady Jambui to show her how he loved her.

"I want no empire won by war's alarms,
Nor in conflicting creeds to claim one true,
You, with the infant sleeping in your arms,
Are all my earth and all my Heaven too."

The conflicting religious and ethical doctrines of the world were indeed remarkably in evidence at Karakorum. The Nestorian Christians had their church, the Mohammedans had their mosque, the Buddhists and the Taoists had their separate temples and the Confucianists had their halls for the preservation of ancestral tablets. And the majority of these sectarians or philosophers hated every one who differed from them with a most lively passion.

The Nestorians, who made no secret of their opinion of all infidels, were alone tolerated by other sects, because the Redemption was not an essential doctrine of their heretical creed, and the Cross, which remained their symbol, was generally supposed to indicate the four points of the compass. Every separate belief was tinged with a strong political bias which, though it affected the minds of priests

and monks with particular fervour, was not absent from the thoughts of Confucian laymen. Even they, whose faith was based on the uniting Word, lost sight of it equally in egotism.

Only a few rare Chinese intellects, that of the statesman Yeliu Chutsai among them, were incapable of rancour. But, like all exceptional men, Chutsai suffered for the faults of the majority.

At first, in the splendid palace that had been built for Ogotai at Karakorum, he was rewarded for long and selfless service by the appointment of " Administrator of Internal Affairs in the conquered empire of north China."

He reformed the finances of his ruined country, controlled Ogotai's issue of a paper currency to meet the emergency and opened the doors of preferment only to cultured literati.

Then, one day in the market-place of Karakorum, two Chinese priests, a Taoist and a Buddhist, quarrelled on a point of doctrine and soon became involved in a question of State, as to which faith Ogotai Khan preferred. Every other sect participated in the argument and the result was a disgraceful broil, which led to the murder of the Buddhist by the Taoist.

When the event was reported to Ogotai, he was in a bad humour from copious drinking and all he could understand was that two Chinese priests had started the trouble. Both must be equally to blame. One was already dead and the other must be executed. But, as this might not be sufficient warning to the other Chinese, he would visit the blame on their own particular patron, Chutsai, who was accordingly arrested and placed under guard.

Having recovered a more sober mood, Ogotai realised that he could not do without his Minister and gave orders for Chutsai's immediate release. But Chutsai refused to move from his own house, in which he had been confined. When his presence at the palace was commanded, he sent back the answer, " Sensible as I am of the honour, my health, undermined by disgrace, prevents my attendance."

And when Ogotai himself went to the statesman's house, he was politely refused admission, as Chutsai was too unwell to entertain the august visitor.

Kubilai then went unofficially to inquire after his friend and was promptly received by Chutsai, who though careworn, was perfectly composed and far from ill. Ceremonious compliments were exchanged, tea was served and Kubilai offered news of his family.

"My uncle has gone to his new palace at Kertchagan, a day's distance away," he said at last.

"I trust that the great Khan will enjoy the change," answered Chutsai impassively.

"The spring season is advancing, sir, and he would be better camping in the hills, according to his custom at this time of year."

Chutsai gently fanned himself and replied: "The Khan must choose what he will do."

"He cannot choose, sir, for, without your guiding hand, he dare not move far from the capital."

Chutsai sharply closed his fan.

"The Khan made me administrator of the affairs of the realm, O prince," he said with lofty dignity. "He ordered my arrest; I was therefore guilty. He then ordered my release; I was therefore innocent. It is easy for him to make a plaything of me, but how can I then direct the affairs of the Empire?"

Chinese reason was irrefutable and Kubilai went sadly away.

Not long after came the news that continued strong drink and the burning sun of the plains had acted together to strike down Ogotai with mortal sickness. From Kertchagan he sent a letter to Chutsai:

"Honourable Friend,—A fellow mortal, in torment, prays you of your mercy to forgive and to come quickly."

Then Chutsai left his own house and rode post haste through the night, till he reached the Khan. Early in the morning he went in and knelt beside Ogotai's bed.

"Master, I am here. How can I serve you?"

"Raise me in your arms," muttered Ogotai. "Not master, but fellow mortal. Friend, what has brought you?"

"Your need, friend. Jên is all powerful."

"Leave me not again, good friend, till I go hence. My young son, Shiramum, should reign after me. For Kuyuk's mother does not love the Chinese."

"Be comforted, friend, I will not leave you."

But when Ogotai Khan was dead, the Empress Turakina appointed herself Regent, set Shiramum aside and summoned her own son Kuyuk to return in haste to the homeland from the West. Further, to consolidate her own position, she replaced Chutsai with a Mohammedan merchant adventurer of unscrupulous character.

There was nothing left to the noble Chutsai but to retire to his home in north China, there to await, with broken heart, release from the troubles of life. After he had joined his ancestors, foreign officials, carrying the mandate of the Empress Regent, broke into his house. He was suspected of having amassed great wealth, in the manner of every Chinese statesman, liable to bribery and corruption.

But, as those officials searched from room to room, they found nothing but the treasures of a scholar: manuscripts and painted books, strange old maps, antique coins of bronze and instruments of music. These relics had no value but their power to abash the impertinent. And the invaders were shamed by the silent company of a philosopher's friends.

Kubilai with his wife, his mother and all other Mongols repaired to the summer camping-ground, where Turakina, the Empress Regent, was supreme and where the election of a new Khan was to be held. The armies of the homeland were streaming back from the West and with them would come Mangu the genial, Hulagu the belligerent and Arikbuga the malicious. Kuyuk was already here and the only absent figure was Batu, Khan of the Golden

Horde, now the most powerful member of the Imperial family.

Though Batu, son of Juchi the bastard, had attended the earlier kurultai out of respect for the memory of Chingiz, he refused now to lend his voice to the election of any son of Ogotai.

But the assembly was no less great and varied than on that first occasion.

Besides the Mongols of blood royal, there came the military and civil governors of their possessions in China, Persia, Turkestan and Transoxiana. There came ambassadors from the Khalif at Baghdad and from the Ismalian Prince of the Assassins, ruling south of the Caspian. There came a Grand Duke of Russia and dignitaries from Syria and from Egypt. All brought rich presents and two thousand tents of white felt were erected for the principal grandees alone. The camp became like a centre of the world, teeming with manifold activities and interests, holding the wealth of empires.

Here were the wisest statesmen, the bravest warriors, the most cunning craftsmen, the greatest herds on earth. Here was luxury past belief and power beyond computation. Every morning, within a magnificent pavilion, surrounded with a balustrade, adorned with embroidered pictures, the Imperial family and their chief generals met together to discuss the election.

Every afternoon, affairs of State gave way to the necessity for relaxation and feasting, with the consumption of much kumiss, proceeded till midnight.

Each day was marked by the donning of new dresses in every variety of colour, scarlet and purple, blue and yellow and green, and horses and camels were decked with equal splendour in painted and bejewelled trappings.

Kuyuk, sober for once, appeared wearing a Persian robe of cloth of gold and a head-dress of osprey feathers, studded with emeralds and pearls. His sword hilt was encrusted with gems and an umbrella of yellow silk, rich in needlework, was carried over his head by attendants. He was greeted with a song of praise from the assembled

multitude and long wands, tufted with scarlet wool, were bent before him at a given signal.

Behind him walked Turkish eunuchs, carrying white staves and directing slaves, who scattered among the crowd, from dishes of jade, handfuls of gold coins and precious stones.

From the entrance of the pavilion, Kubilai watched the scene. He knew that this bid for popularity had been engineered for Kuyuk's benefit by the Empress Regent, and his own expression was more critical than ever. Suddenly, however, his brown eyes shone with interest at something new and strange.

Through the ranks of the brilliant crowd, that grovelled for the wide-thrown largesse, two wild and stalwart figures pushed their way. Both appeared like barbarians by contrast with the gay multitude. They wore robes of rough brown wool, faded, soiled and ragged, girdled with rope and revealing their legs wound with bandages of felt to prevent the fatigue of a long journey on horseback. Their bearded faces were gaunt and burned dark from exposure. They neither joined in the sounds of acclamation, nor stooped to enrich themselves, but, with a proud yet eager mien, they watched Kuyuk pass and then themselves hurried away.

"Who are these men?" inquired Kubilai of an officer, and learned that they were ambassadors from the Pope, a western potentate of Ta Ts'in, Great China, the name by which the Mongols knew Rome.

"Never have I seen so curious an embassy," said Kubilai. "Why are they so meanly clad? Their Pope must be a monarch in sore need of our alliance."

Apparently these ambassadors had come alone and unattended, had brought no presents and had expressed to the Empress Regent, who had already received them, their desire to help the Mongols rather than to seek their assistance

"Since they are evidently poor, that shows a generous spirit," said Kubilai. "I will myself see that they are treated with greater honour than any other ambassadors."

Before long he found an opportunity to entertain them privately in his own tent.

Their names, which sounded to him most strange and foreign, were, he had heard, Friar John of Piane de Carpine, an Italian, and Friar Benedict, a Pole. They were holy men, monks of the Franciscan Order, and their Pope, who was called Innocent IV, had sent them here as missionaries, in case all other attempts to stop the Mongol invasion of Europe should fail.

They were the first Westerners that Kubilai had ever seen, and he was struck by their uncouth appearance but impressed by their qualities of courage and intelligence.

"You must have dared a hard journey," he said to them through an interpreter.

Ay, the journey had been hard, but they had learnt much. In Europe, it was believed that the Tartars were no human foe, that they were in league with the powers of darkness, that their faces were the snouts of dogs and that they lived on human flesh. It had been a great surprise to find that this was far from the truth.

"The more credit to you for coming," said Kubilai. "Tell me how you fared."

They told him how, proceeding from Rome by Bohemia, Poland, Silesia and Russia, they had first reached the Mongol outposts on the Dnieper, and thence had been sent on to the headquarters of Batu Khan on the Volga. The Pope had not equipped them with any adequate interpreter, nor with any gifts, so Friar John had invested on his own account in furs, with which to pay his way. But he had soon discovered that these commodities were in such demand wherever he stopped, that his stock was depleted long before his journey's end.

"We found Batu a great prince living on the milk of his herds. He showed us much consideration and produced an interpreter. We thought he must be the ruler of all the Tartars and delivered our letters to him, but he said that they should be sent on here and that we should follow them."

" At that time, my uncle Ogotai Khan must have been still ruling."

" Ay, Ogotai's name was mentioned. When we continued the journey, we endured sore tribulation, cold, hunger and sickness. We rode through a devastated land scattered with human skulls and bones. The Tartars, who accompanied us, provided fresh horses for our use many times a day. We went across Turkestan, through a frontier town called Otrar, along what we heard called the Great North Road and past lakes and mountains, till we reached the country of the Naimans. Here dwell people whose mouths are so small, that they live only on liquids and the odours of meat and fruit."

" None of the Naiman tribe we know are like that," said Kubilai.

" It is a fact," said Friar John doggedly. " And there are many other monsters among them—men who sleep in the shade of their own protruding lips and men with one eye in the centre of their foreheads. But here we heard that Ogotai Khan had lately died. God had arrested the Tartar armies and they were turning back to select a new ruler. Then faster than ever we rode, in order to reach this camp in time for the election. Now, we want nothing except to deliver our message. We cannot do that to Kuyuk until he is proclaimed, but while we are waiting, we can show to you, prince, the way of salvation."

They preached to Kubilai, but, since the Latin of the Church had to be translated into Russian and thence into the Mongol language, he found their doctrines incomprehensible and could not appreciate the difference between orthodox and Nestorian Christianity.

Nor, though they waited many weary months, could they convert Kuyuk, when he, proclaimed supreme Khan at last, received them at his first audience.

They had heard the people, gathered round his golden throne, demanding his dominion over them and vowing to obey him. They had seen him placed on a square mat of felt and thus elevated to the solemn words : " Look upwards and recognize God and downwards and see the

felt on which you sit. If you reign well over your kingdom, you shall rejoice in glory, all the world shall bow to your rule and God will give you everything your heart can desire. But if you do otherwise, you shall be miserable, lowly and so poor that even this felt on which you sit shall not be left to you." They learned that Kuyuk protected all creeds and actually practised the rites of the Greek Church. And it seemed to them at last, that perhaps these Tartars were not much farther from the Word of their own faith than the majority of Europeans.

For when, in the end, Kuyuk was anxious to send back with them Mongol ambassadors to the Pope, Friar John would not agree.

"There are dissensions and wars among us," he said, "and it would be better not. Though we have not been suspected here, Tartars in the West might be taken for spies and put to death, as our people are, for the most part, arrogant and hasty."

Then Kuyuk gave the Friars letters to take back to the Pope and dismissed them with rich presents.

And Kubilai said to himself: "Strange, most strange! These good and simple men show discrimination and seem to stand in a better relation to us than to their own fellows. Yet surely they are inspired by Jên."

CHAPTER IV

KUYUK's mother, the Empress Turakina, did not long outlive his election and his reign proceeded for five years. Then, possibly because he desired to escape from the multitude of his advisers and in particular from the sectarian antagonisms of Karakorum, he set out for Imil, on his western frontier, to distribute largesse.

He was harassed by a variety of doctrines and enfeebled with gout from intemperance, but Kubilai's mother suspected that the motive of this move must be a secret attack on Batu, actuated by jealousy. It therefore seemed to her necessary to warn her sister, Batu's mother, of her suspicion. Moreover, Batu was a powerful ally, to be counted upon in case of a future election.

Though the appointment by Chingiz of Ogotai had been fulfilled, Ogotai's own appointment of his younger son, Shiramum, had been over-ruled by Turakina. And, when Kuyuk died, the question must arise anew, who should reign in his stead? Surely no son of Kuyuk, if Tului's widow could help it and if Batu were on her side.

She was a far-seeing woman. Did she see the hand of Death on Kuyuk? However that may be, soon after her warning reached Batu, Kuyuk, innocent of any offensive aim, left a wearisome world and his widow, Ogul Gaimish, was appointed Regent at Karakorum.

Batu, the powerful, far from the homeland, at once called a kurultai. In vain did Kuyuk's widow and family protest. Kubilai, now a strong young man of thirty-one, and his three brothers hastened to the assembly. And it was there decided that, since Tului had been the favourite of Chingiz, Mangu, the first born of Tului, should now rule.

But, during the festivities that marked this election at Batu's court, a troop of Mangu's outposts arrived there, bringing with them a Mongol herdsman, who told a strange story.

"I went forth from my camp, seeking a strayed mule, O Khan! and came on a solitary khibitka (bullock cart), with a broken axle. I went to the help of the driver, who presently revealed to me that he was travelling in advance of a great company, led by Shiramum, the son of Ogotai, to attack you. I parted from the man in peace and reported what I had heard to your outpost Now, your warriors have ridden day and night, and I with them, to warn you."

"We will meet these visitors with a host of our own," said warlike Batu.

A strong force was immediately dispatched against the advancing troops and Shiramum, with his brother Kashin and the two young sons of Kuyuk, were brought into the camp. Here they made obeisance to Mangu and offered presents, but when their caravan was searched, it was found to be laden with concealed arms and they were obliged to confess a deep-laid plot to gain supremacy.

Many of the conspirators were executed, but the lives of Shiramum and his three companions were spared, mainly by the intercession of the mother of Mangu and Kubilai.

That good lady was the friend of Shiramum's mother, but she was no friend of Kuyuk's widow, the Regent, Ogul Gaimish. When, therefore, she discovered that the mother of Shiramum and Ogul Gaimish had plotted together, her jealousy overruled her pity and she said: "I have done enough in saving Shiramum, his brother and his nephews. Shiramum's mother is undoubtedly a witch or she would not consort with Ogul Gaimish, who, as all the world knows, is a witch woman. Let them be tried and convicted together."

A great trial of the two women was held. One of the two was the widow of Ogotai and the mother of his favourite son, Shiramum. The other was an equally important lady, from her position as Regent of the homeland. But their rank could not save them, when the Mongols

suspected their chastity. The mother of Mangu, the elected Khan, now all powerful, had said that they were witches, that they were possessed of the powers of darkness. The dreadful accusation must be proved.

They were publicly disrobed, that all the world might see if any mark of evil had defamed their bodies. They were found guilty and, by the Mongol law, which forbade the shedding of Imperial blood, they were tied in bags of felt and drowned.

The four princes of the house of Ogotai were disgraced and banished to the bounds of the empire. Kashin went off vowing vengeance and protesting that his cause was just, according to the oath of allegiance that had originally been taken to his father. Shiramum, whose cause was still more just, since Ogotai had nominated him the successor, had seen his mother done to death and looked forward to nothing but exile in the hell of that memory.

But Kubilai, a witness of his downfall, suddenly intervened.

"Cousin," he said, "life is more bitter than the end of life. Yet in another country, man may understand the right relationship to his fellows." Shiramum, half mad with despair, stared at Kubilai. "My heart has been in that country for many years, Cousin Shiramum. Now that Mangu rules, I shall go to China. Will you go with me?"

In Kubilai's eyes Shiramum saw fellowship. He took Kubilai's hand and vowed allegiance.

Abuses in the government of North China had been rife since the death of the wise statesman, Yeliu Chutsai and, after Ogotai's time, the Mongols had made no fresh offensive on the frontier of the treacherous Sung or southern dynasty. Now Mangu gave to his brother Kubilai the conquered Chinese provinces of Ho-nan and Shen-si and appointed Kubilai besides Lieutenant-General of the whole country south of the Gobi Desert.

Off went Kubilai to the land that called him and with

him went his friend Shiramum, who, however, did not long survive the renewal of hope and so passes from the story.

With Kubilai also went his wife, Jambui, a perfect mate, ever ruling him with her gentle influence and ever ready to encourage him in consulting another learned Chinese minister called Yao Chü, who now accompanied them. In China, swords were to be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Mongol troops were turned on to the cultivation of ravaged lands and Mongol cattle were yoked to the ploughs that Mongol enterprise provided.

Meanwhile the genial Mangu, superstitious but shrewd, intemperate but tolerant, ruled over his great empire from Karakorum, where his election had been duly confirmed.

The population of that city was now more than ever cosmopolitan. For not only had the homing armies from the West brought with them many prisoners of various European nationalities, but certain adventurers, some orthodox Christians and some Mahommedans, pretended to have come here as envoys. Among them one even claimed to have been sent by King Louis IX of France and of pious memory, to ask for help against the Saracens.

Another gave out that he was an Armenian monk, who had come from Jerusalem, where he had lived as a hermit, in consequence of a heavenly vision. He was actually a cloth weaver and his attempts to convert Mangu by telling him that, if he would become a Christian, the Pope would acknowledge his supremacy, met with no success. He therefore took up his residence in a beautiful tent chapel of scarlet cloth that had, by a misunderstanding, been delivered from St. Louis to the Mongols, and now occupied an honoured place in front of the Imperial pavilion. Here the Armenian spent his time in concocting over a brazier a medicament of wild rhubarb, with which he was always ready to dose any ailing person. A crucifix was steeped in the draught to render it efficacious, but, as the potency of the medicine depended on the addition of

holy water, in varying quantities, results were sometimes unfortunate.

In this atmosphere of faith and fraud, small wonder if a genuine missionary, no less zealous than Friar John of Piane de Carpine because he came independently, supported by King Louis but unauthorised by the Pope, learned, like his predecessor, more than he could teach.

Friar William of Rubruck in Flanders, a mendicant Franciscan and a stout and sensible man withal, had started forth from Cyprus, on his journey of ten thousand miles, with one travelling companion and an interpreter called Abd-ullah, the Slave of God, but nicknamed Homo Dei. They had carried humble presents of fruit, wine and biscuits, and first they had been received by Batu's son, Sartach, and then by Batu himself. But by that time the gifts had run short, for owing to lack of provisions on the way, Friar William and the others had consumed most of the supply. Then, following a different route to that Friar John had taken, they had endured equal fatigue and hardship, but, on reaching the country of the Naimans, had been surprised to encounter none of those monsters that had been reported.

When eventually they came to the summer camp of Mangu Khan, ten days' distance from Karakorum, Friar William was closely questioned by the Mongol officers, whether King Louis, as the representative monarch of Europe, wanted to make peace.

"As to that," answered Friar William, "I tell you he never did you any harm. If he had done something for which you had to make war on him or his people, he would willingly, as a just man, make apology and ask for peace."

"But why did he send you if he does not want to make peace?" persisted the Mongols.

It seemed to him hopeless to reason with such people. The Western and the Eastern points of view were as the poles apart.

Soon after, Mangu received him and his companions in a tent hung with golden tissue and warmed with a fire of wormwood roots, briars and dried dung. The Khan

was dressed in a robe of sealskin and was seated on a couch, with a young wife and several children. In frank good humour, he displayed his falcons to his visitors, rice wine was served and then Friar William tried to deliver, through the interpreter, his message of salvation. But the rice wine was too much for Homo Dei, who promptly became intoxicated and, as Mangu himself was not quite sober, understanding was impossible.

Friar William next attempted to conduct an orthodox service in the tent chapel, occupied by the Armenian, of whom he strongly disapproved. But though Mangu and his wife, with all their court, attended this service, the occasion was disastrous to any hope of the Church. A throne was erected before the altar and, while a hymn was sung, the Empress distributed presents and wine was served to all.

To the Mongols a feast, however sacred, was honoured by its prolongation. It was impossible to stop them. They ate and they drank riotously with loud rejoicing throughout the day, and the Imperial party left the chapel at last, escorted by Nestorian priests and Shamans, who chanted and howled together in drunken frenzy.

Later at Karakorum, Friar William celebrated Mass for the benefit of the European prisoners, among whom a certain Frenchman, called Boucher, served the Khan as a goldsmith and was highly honoured for his art. The magnificent throne, where Mangu sat to hold his court in the great central hall of the Imperial palace, had been made by Boucher. And for the same place he had also constructed a marvellous fountain in the shape of a branching tree of solid silver. Around the tree, four silver lions spouted wine into metal basins and above it a silver angel mechanically sounded a trumpet when the wine required to be replenished.

Friar William was then invited by Mangu to prove his doctrine best against Nestorians, Buddhists and Mohammedans.

But the momentous discussion that took place led to nothing but complete and mutual misunderstanding and

further efforts to convert the Khan only elicited this answer:

"We Mongols," said Mangu, "believe there is but one God, by Whom we live and by Whom we die and for Whom we have an upright heart. But, as God gave us the different fingers of the hand, so He gives to men divers ways. God gives you the Scriptures and you Christians keep them not. They do not tell you, for example, that you should find fault with one another, do they?"

Alas, poor friar! Personally he was too good and kind ever to have found fault with anyone, but aware of internal dissension in Christendom, he could not deny the impeachment.

"I longed," he wrote afterwards, "to have power like Moses to work miracles."

That was denied him, but he had the power to win respect. For when at last he left Mongolia and refused to take Mongol ambassadors, as Friar John had refused, he offered to come again and Mangu told him he would be welcome.

He carried some letters of small account to King Louis and strongly recommended a proper embassy from the Pope to reply suitably to the Mongol message. But, like many another prophet he was not without honour except in his own country.

While Kubilai's eldest brother, Mangu, was thus engaged, his other brother, Hulagu, whom no story of that time can disregard, went westward again to complete the Mongol conquest of Persia.

Hulagu, belligerent and brilliant as ever, could now realise his destiny.

His first object was the extermination of the Assassins, that heretical sect of Islam, whose philosophy had degenerated to atheism and whose politics were purely communistic. Unlike any later communists, however, their dreams were as practical as their actions. To enlist disciples, their present leader Ala'ed din Mohammed,

called by the Crusaders The Old Man of the Mountains, had no recourse to Marxian reasoning. Instead, he transported them, temporarily insensible under the influence of the potent drug hashish or hemp, to the material Paradise he promised to the faithful—an actual garden of surpassing beauty, where complaisant houris dwelt and every terrestrial pleasure abounded. Banished in the same way from this Paradise, the ardent neophytes were informed that, to regain it, they need only obey implicitly the commands of their leader. And naturally convinced, they did not hesitate, in that hope, to commit murder or even suicide.

Many notable political crimes had been attempted or achieved by the Assassins since the founding of the sect. Now their power south of the Caspian constituted a reign of terror, and their fanaticism enabled them to hold out against Hulagu for a long time.

Their headquarters, at the rocky fortress of Alamut, the Eagle's Nest, fell after a year's siege. But another fortress, commanded by the son of Ala'ed din, resisted the Mongols for fourteen years, and only submitted at last from the want of clothing, and not of victuals or other necessities.

In these days the Assassins are worth remembering. For, though they merely survived in the East as a scattered and obscure sect, their tenets were carried westward, with far reaching effect, by their temporary allies the Crusaders. While Hulagu was quenching communism in Asia, the Christian Knight, Hugo de Payens, first Grand Master of the Knights Templars, was introducing it to Europe under the guise of the secret revolutionary society of the Grand Orient.

When Hulagu's first object was achieved, he dispatched an embassy to the Abbasid Khalif at Baghdad, calling on him to submit and complaining that he had not helped to overthrow the Assassins.

The Khalif, Mostassin, traced his descent from Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet Mohammed, and was strongly

opposed by the Shi-ites, who supported the line of the Prophet's daughter. His disposition was miserly, he was the son of an Ethiopian slave woman and, at the age of forty-six, he had already reigned at Baghdad for fifteen years.

He received the embassy from Hulagu with feigned friendship, but the Mohammedans who brought his answer insulted the Mongols.

" The Khalif is as crooked as a bow," said Hulagu, his blue eyes flashing, " but I will make him as straight as an arrow."

The Mongol army crossed the Tigris and invested Baghdad with siege engines elevated on mounds of ancient Mesopotamian bricks. The walls of the city were breached and captured and the Khalif's inadequate army surrendered.

Then Mostassin, with three sons and three thousand grandees, repaired to the Mongol camp and Baghdad, the centre of the civilised Moslem world, containing the hoarded treasures of the Abbasid Khalifs during their rule of five centuries, was most thoroughly sacked for seven days. Through the influence of Hulagu's favourite wife, who was a Nestorian, the only lives and property spared were those of Christians.

Hulagu, occupying with his prisoners the Khalif's palace, gave there a great feast and cynically treated Mostassin as his host.

Splendid was this palace, built, according to the records, of fragrant and precious woods and black and white jade. Immeasurable was its hidden treasure of money, jewels, coffers full of silk and wool and metal tissues, and gorgeous brocades, woven with gold and silver to represent, like tapestries, huntsmen, wild beasts, woods and rocks. In its harem, seven hundred fair women were guarded by one thousand eunuchs.

Had Mostassin, the miser, offered from the first as ransom a tithe of his wealth, he might have prevailed. But when it was taken from him, " This is my all ! " he wailed. " O conqueror, will you leave me nothing ? "

" O generous host," answered Hulagu grimly, " surely I will leave you what most you prize, and you

shall lack nothing but the courage and resource you never had!"

He conducted Mostassin, with a show of ceremony, to a room in a tower, where a table was set as though for a meal, with nothing on the dishes but gold coins.

"Here, O Khalif," he said, "is the nourishment that has sustained your soul! Taste and see whether it will equally support your body, for no other food will you get."

And Mostassin, the miser, last of the independent Abbasid Khalifs, was left imprisoned in that tower till, starving, he begged for a swifter end. Then he was taken out and with his sons, wrapped in carpets, was trampled to death by horses.

Yet, after this frightful fate had befallen the head of Islam, Hulagu, now master of Baghdad, put a pertinent question to the Ulema or Mohammedan Council.

"Which man is better as a sovereign; an unbeliever who is just or a Moslem unjust in his dealings?"

And a man above flattery, one of the most highly esteemed of their sages, answered: "The unbeliever who is just should be preferred to the unjust believer."

Thus did Hulagu, Kubilai's brother, lay the foundation of his mighty Persian empire, which he eventually left to his sons, of whom more hereafter.

It was further consolidated by his conquest of Georgia, Armenia, Kurdistan and part of Syria.

Only Egypt, the sovereignty of which had been usurped by the early Sultans' Mameluke slaves, Kipchak tribesmen from the Caucasus, themselves akin to the Mongols, was strong enough to resist his power. The Mameluke Sultan, Beibars, remained supreme in Egypt and in western Syria, where he plotted with Barka Khan of the Golden Horde, younger brother and successor of the great Batu, between whom and Hulagu had arisen many jealousies and resentments.

So Hulagu may be left moving against Barka in a final successful campaign.

Then, said a Mohammedan historian: "The Almighty Artist had covered the river of Derbend with plates of silver, and the Furrier of Winter had clad the hills and heaths in ermine; the river being frozen as hard as a rock to the depth of a spear's length, an army of Mongols went forth at the command of Barka . . . filthy as Ghúls and Devils of the dry places and in numbers countless as the raindrops . . ."

CHAPTER V

During this time Kubilai was ruling the Chinese province of Shen-si, a country larger than France. But soon he decided to penetrate the land farther, to pass through Ssu-chuan and the oldest and least disturbed areas of China, and to reach the province of Yun-nan, said to be the home of aboriginal tribes, which existed long before the Mongol-Chinese race.

So off he went in state with an armed force, led by the young Mongol general, Uriangkadai, that worthy son of Subotai the Valiant.

They took a road that led them through the lovely orchard scenery and ancient walled towns of western Shen-si, between willow trees and ditches, and over stone bridges that spanned small streams.

In the yellowish-coloured soil of this country may still be found buried the prehistoric bronzes, that figure the most suggestive symbols of Chinese philosophy. And here was probably the first settling ground of those nomadic peoples, who drove out the non-Mongol tribes already in occupation—tribes which had themselves, at a remote period, ousted for ever, from that territory, the non-Mongol aboriginals.

Passing through the wheat, sorghum and paddy fields that surrounded the splendid capital city of Si-gnan Fu, Kubilai reached the woody and mountainous district of southern Shen-si. Then once more he trod that great military road, paved with stone and constructed on timber corbels, inserted in the cliffs, where he had marched before with his father Tului.

On he went again by this road, over the mountains into Ssu-chuan, where the ancient city of Han-chung Fu occupies a beautiful valley. On and on, above wild gorges and

between cliffs of red sandstone, without now turning eastward, he went till he came to Ch'eng-tu Fu, the capital city of Ssuchuan, which lay on the border of territory that still belonged to the Sung or southern dynasty of China, and which occupied the only level ground of any extent in the country.

That territory was called Manzi and will be described later. But it may be wondered whether, at this time, the Sung Emperor, despite the alliance that had been made between his line and Ogotai, recalled with dread the warning of the last of the Kin dynasty: "When the lips are gone, the teeth are no longer protected from the cold."

Did the Mongols, who with the help of southern teeth had so thoroughly destroyed the northern lips, come now, so close to the Sung frontier, in peace or in war? Those bare teeth, yellow with age and already crumbling in decay, may well have chattered.

But Kubilai, with peace in his heart, went on; past the wonderful city of Ch'eng-tu, through which tributaries of the Yangtse River flow, under fine bridges and beside stone quays and along one of those tributaries till it joined the main stream. Then he followed up the mighty Yangtse, till, in its upper reaches, he found it called the River of Golden Sand and was able to cross it on rafts.

He was now in a new land, unexplored by foreigners until comparatively modern times. The climate was warm, the rugged highland scenery was magnificent and the mountians, east of the tributary valleys through which he went, were the home of those strange and various tribes he had come to see.

His objective was the city of Tali, the capital of an independent kingdom (that of the dominant Shan tribe) in western Yun-nan.

Tali lay on the shore of a large lake, with snow-capped mountains behind, and must have been impregnable to bow and spear. But Kubilai had no use for either.

He was followed by crowds of wondering tribesmen from the eastern mountains, the Si-fan, the Lo-los, the Hai-man and the Pai-man (Black and White Barbarians)

and even the Miao-tzu (Shoots of the Soil) from distant Kwei-chou province; all of whom had suffered from and were rendered fierce by Chinese tyranny.

Kubilai's ideal was human fellowship. He paraded his troops before Tali, unfurled his silken banners and, entering the city as a friend rather than a conqueror, conferred on its ruler an honorific title.

The time came when amicable relations permitted Kubilai to seek relaxation in sport from affairs of State. Nowhere could better sport be found than in the eastern mountains, where the native Lo-lo tribesmen, mounted on good horses and armed with barbed spears, chased the musk-deer, or on foot with large cross-bows and poisoned arrows hunted the tiger.

"I would see more of these Lo-los," said Kubilai. "They must be a hardy race."

"They are Man, which means in our language barbarian," said his Chinese informant contemptuously.

"That I will judge in the light of appreciation," said Kubilai mildly. "Without that light, who can say what is barbarism and what civilisation? I have myself taken wise men from the West by their appearance to be barbarians, and have heard from them that they supposed us of the East to be demons. Bring hither one of the Lo-los that I may learn more."

A-tchu, the young headman of a Lo-lo mountain village, was therefore brought and presented to Kubilai, who wondered to see his proud and independent bearing and his splendid but foreign physique.

The eyes of A-tchu were not characterised by the sloping lid of the Mongol race; the face of A-tchu was a clear reddish brown and very handsome. The dignified dress that clothed his exceptionally tall figure was a sleeveless mantle of fine grey felt, gathered round the neck by a cord, reaching to the heels and having a fringe of cotton web round the lower border.

Questioned regarding the name of his tribe, he answered loftily: "Lo-lo is a term of abuse given to us by the

yellow foreign devils. What do we care? We are Black Bones, superior to them and to the White Bones of our own race."

"What is your origin, O A-tchu?"

"Who can say? We have always tilled the soil. We came first, perchance, from the west. We have never changed through all the ages, though the slit-eyed yellow devils drove us out of our own easy land into the mountains. There we live by sport and by plunder."

Kubilai had heard that the tribesmen raided the Chinese merchants, who travelled to Tibet with loads of salt cakes that were used as currency, but he was surprised by A-tchu's frankness.

"Thus we pay back old scores," said the man, grinning. "We cocks are not afraid."

"Do you Black Bones also call yourselves cocks?"

"The cock is the symbol of manhood and the object of our reverence. The sign of the cock is the horn that we all wear."

A-tchu removed his wide high-crowned hat of rice straw and revealed his brown hair gathered and rolled in a cotton cloth into a top knot nine inches long.

"Have you any sons, A-tchu?"

"My firstborn, Little Cock, will be born before long. Through the divination of burned mutton bones and sticks tossed into the air, everything is propitious. But we make sure, by inserting the feathers of a fowl into a split bamboo and throwing it on to the roof of the homestead to avert all evil."

"That will be fortunate for you. A man requires a son to succeed him as head of the tribe."

"Not among our people. Our women can rule, if need be, and we honour them."

"We Mongols honour our women too. . . . I would see your village, A-tchu. I will ride there with you and, after Little Cock is born, we will go hunting together."

A strange expression suddenly crossed A-tchu's face, an expression that might have been dread had his boldness been less apparent. Then he drew himself up more proudly

than ever and said, with a look of engaging honesty, " Ay, we will ride to the village ; but we shall not hunt together when Little Cock comes."

Kubilai looked him straight in the eyes. Was this a hint of treachery ? There was fine resignation and lofty purpose in A-tchu's face, but nothing more.

" I shall bring no warriors to your village," said Kubilai, " and I shall be in your hands."

" Your trust will not be betrayed," said A-tchu.

So they rode out to the village in the eastern mountains, Kubilai with a few attendants and A-tchu leading the way, mounted on his own good horse, whose long tail was tied in a loop that the rider should not be splashed with mud.

And when they reached the remote and simple place, Kubilai found much that was new, interesting and in no way barbaric.

He was lodged in one of the wooden and thatched two-storied houses and treated with ceremonious courtesy. He discovered that these people were lovers of the arts, particularly of music, which they delighted to make by blowing through the perpendicular pipes of an instrument peculiar to themselves. They could read and write in their own script, and their women were gaily dressed in exquisitely embroidered and pleated skirts, which were in later years to be imitated, but never excelled, by Chinese men. A-tchu conducted Kubilai everywhere and even took him hunting.

" I am free to go with you at present," he said gravely, " for my time is not yet come."

" What do you expect ? " said Kubilai.

" Have I not told you ? " answered A-tchu. " Little Cock is shortly to be born."

" But surely that is the mother's business," said Kubilai, surprised.

" Among foreign devils that may be the custom," said A-tchu. " But not among the Black Bones . . ."

He hesitated, then appeared to gain confidence from Kubilai's consideration. " It is strange," he said, " that

men must needs suffer more than women. In childbirth, the woman endures a few hours' inconvenience at most, but the father of a firstborn must subdue his flesh for one long month, so that his strength may pass into his son."

"Is this the law of the Lo-los, O A-tchu?"

"When Little Cock is born, you will see me no more. I must go to bed with the infant at my side and there endure the painful ministrations of women and be fed on pap, till the power leaves my limbs and passes through my soul to the child's soul. I shall not be permitted to rise night or day, neither may I touch meat or any weapon, nor wash myself, nor smoke. If I failed in any particular, Little Cock would suffer. For a son requires the care of his father."

"It is a great sacrifice, A-tchu. Your child will surely take virtue from it. This strange custom of yours must be founded on a sense of the relationship of father and son."

"Man is the superior being," said A-tchu, "and, by acting nearer to the behaviour of the wild bird, who takes his turn at hatching the eggs in the nest, he follows the Law which is just. I trust in the gods and therefore, though I shrink from the ordeal now, I shall have good luck in my hatching."

A day came when Kubilai expected A-tchu to ride back with him to Tali. Instead, the wife of A-tchu, a comely smiling woman, appeared bearing a message:

"From the Headman of the Black Bones, A-tchu, to his friend Kubilai.—I am come to my time. Farewell, you who understand."

"So Little Cock is born," said Kubilai, looking at the woman and noting her grace and strength. "May your son prosper. Do you leave him now to his father?"

"Nay, lord; how could that be? The child is not weaned from me till he is three years old. So he will grow fat and lusty. But it is for A-tchu to feed his soul."

Kubilai rode out through the village and passed the house of A-tchu. He looked and saw at an upper window a bed, and on it lying the still figure of a man, very pale, with an infant in his arms.

And his heart went out to his friend A-tchu and he felt that awe, which only the great mysteries of Life and Death inspire.

As he rode back to Tali, he thought so often and so long of A-tchu that it was as though he were with A-tchu in that upper room.

He knew how, when they had first brought Little Cock to his father, A-tchu must have wondered whether he could ever feel love for anything so ugly and so small. Its tiny head was covered with light-coloured hair, like the downy fluff of a chicken and it appeared to have no affinity with him. But when A-tchu had curbed his will and starved for a few days, it seemed to him that he was growing nearer to Little Cock. With the appetite of Little Cock he hungered, with the feeble but tenacious strength of Little Cock he felt, with the trustfulness of Little Cock he slept.

And Kubilai, with his keen sympathy, knew then that gradually a great wonder happened. For, as in that proximity of soul and body Little Cock took from A-tchu the hardihood that should give the infant the strength of a man, so A-tchu took from Little Cock the innocence that should give the man the heart of a child. And love was born between A-tchu and Little Cock—love and a splendid confidence that no foreign devil, who leaves his son to women, can know.

Thus Kubilai saw the end and meaning of the hatching. And he said to himself, " This is surely an example of Jên—man in the right relationship of father and son. And where that principle is, there is no barbarism."

Kubilai's great success in the south-west of China was the triumph of reason.

His brother, Mangu Khan, that typical Mongol, had, however, intended that an alliance with the aboriginal tribes, who detested the Chinese, should be for the purpose of counting on their assistance in an attack on the Sung Empire. While this Empire remained China was not yet conquered.

Accordingly, Kubilai was recalled to the homeland and Uriangkadai, who remained behind, received orders to attack the eastern Tibetans.

When Kubilai was allowed to return, it was on the understanding that he should carry on the war in Tibet. Instead, his pacific character led him to the friendliest relations with the Tibetan Lama priests, and, in that country which was the home of northern Buddhism, Kubilai, cherishing the gentle example of his wife Jambui, himself became a Buddhist. Here, remote from the passionless ethics of the Chinese, was, he felt, a faith which satisfied his Shamanist instincts and was, at the same time, more pure and lofty than any old tradition.

But again, philosophic discussion with Tibetan Lamas was not part of Mangu's plan. A young Mongol general, called Bayan of the Barin tribe, who had fought with distinction under Hulagu in Syria, was now sent to join Kubilai and bring him to a more combative state of mind.

Bayan of the Hundred Eyes, so called perhaps because nothing escaped his vigilant gaze, brought reinforcements, and was therefore attacked by those very aboriginals, who had reason to fear any show of force, but had recognised Kubilai as a friend. They were promptly quelled, to the satisfaction of the Chinese, which was still further from Mangu's idea.

Thoroughly jealous by this time of the prestige that Kubilai was winning in China, Mangu recalled him to Karakorum for the second time, and added the bitter affront of depriving him of his rule in Ho-nan.

The blow was unjust and quite unmerited. Had Kubilai chosen to resent it, he could have stayed in China with the whole-hearted support of those who saw in him more of the temperance of a Chinese than the ferocity of a Mongol.

But Kubilai had become a Buddhist, and the Law and the Order of the Lord Sakya Muni enjoins: "To arrive at illumination, regard the material world and its splendour and say, 'nothing of all this can last.'"

Also, there was a wise counsellor at Kubilai's side, the statesman Yao Chü, not a Buddhist, but one whose life was regulated by the Chinese principle, Jên. Yao Chü advised submission to the ruling Khan, who was also the elder brother, saying that only thus in this case, could good fellowship prevail. Kubilai submitted, relinquished Ho-nan and returned to Karakorum. And this submission so surprised and touched the genial Mangu, who in his cups was sometimes spiteful, that he at once reinstated Kubilai and revealed his own ambitions.

Those ambitions were indeed worth while. A united Chinese Empire under Mongol rule, and the removal of the central Mongol capital from distant Karakorum to a point not so far from Chung Tu (old Peking), the former central capital of the Kin dynasty.

Outside the Great Wall and north of Chung Tu, the perfect site for the new city was at Kaiping Fu, or Shang Tu, as it came to be called.

"And now," said Mangu, "we must definitely attack the power of the Sung. They have imprisoned our envoys and I shall myself lead the expedition. You, brother, shall go with me, and Uriangkadai will join us from the south. I have misjudged you, Kubilai, through listening to our young brother, Arikbuga, who has no love for you. We will leave him in command at Karakorum."

They set out for Ssu-chuan and the Sung rushed to protect the borders of their empire. But, though Mangu gained various successes and Kubilai played his part, results during a year were inconclusive.

Finally, at the siege of an obscure fortress, the Mongols had to deal with a more deadly enemy than the Chinese, for the scourge of dysentery decimated their ranks, and Mangu suffered with the rest. In him the disease was aggravated by strong drink, the curse of his family, and suddenly he succumbed.

The siege was raised and his body was carried back to the homeland by his army and buried beside Chingiz and Tului.

Kubilai had already left the field of war, which had

never attracted him, and was now at Shang Tu. That idea of a new Mongol Chinese capital drew him, but rather as Kaiping Fu, its original name, meaning City of Peace, than as Shang Tu, the Upper Capital of Mangu's intention. They had indeed temporised by deciding to combine the two names, and the Mongols called it Shangdu Keibung.

In a country abounding in wildfowl, various kinds of crane, partridges, pheasants and swans, a wall of earth faced with brick and unhewn stone was built to embrace an area of about five square miles, enclosing the double enceinte of the city. This outer wall confined a lovely park, watered by fountains, rivers and brooks and dotted with small woods where bigger game was preserved. Within the first inner wall, which had six gates, were marble temples, memorial arches and tablets, and the sculptured colossal figures of dragons, lions and tortoises.

Here also were the mews for falcons that would be used for hawking, the kennels for leopards that would be used for the chase, and the stables for a particular breed of snow-white stallions and mares, which continued through subsequent dynasties until the modern revolution. The milk of these mares was used for a sacred brew of kumiss, that was sacrificed by the Mongols in libation to the memory of Chingiz, and, according to custom, in bi-annual festivals.

The innermost wall, which had three arched gateways, south, east, and west, formed the square of a magnificent marble palace, which was beautified year by year with all the taste of China and of Persia. Outside, the curved roofs were covered with iridescent yellow tiles, the columns were set with jade, the balustrades were of vermilion lacquer and the pillars and door posts shone with all the colours of the rainbow. Within, the rooms were entirely gilded and painted in exquisite detail with the figures of men, beasts and birds, with woodland scenes and with flowers.

But the residence that Kubilai preferred at Shang Tu was a smaller building, set like a jewel in the west of the

palace garden : a fairy-like pavilion, built of gilded bamboo and supported by gilt and lacquered columns and painted dragons, whose heads and outstretched claws upheld the architraves. The roof was also of bamboo, highly glazed, cut into semi-cylinders and laid like Roman tiles. The whole thing could be taken to pieces and removed from one site to another and, when erected, it was braced like a tent against the wind with ropes of silk. It was like a large and delicate toy, and it had once belonged to the Kin Emperor Nin-kiassu in his southern capital K'ai-fêng Fu. The Chinese had removed it thence for Kubilai, as grown-up people might indulge the whim of a child for something at once splendid and simple.

Kubilai loved his City of Peace and bequeathed his love to his descendants. One of these sang :

> " Ah ! my Shangdu Keibung, union of all perfections . . .
> When I used to wake betimes and look forth,
> How the breezes blew, loaded with fragrance,
> And turn which way I would, all was
> Glorious perfection of beauty ! " *

And so deep was Kubilai's appreciation of the place, that he bequeathed it further still in a dream that inspired an English poet.†

> " In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure dome decree . . .
> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
> Where blossomed many an incense bearing tree,
> And here were forests ancient as the hills,
> Enfolding sunny spots of greenery."

Mediæval geographers of the West, who placed the terrestrial Paradise in the Far East, were perhaps not far wrong after all.

But only the wild cranes, still flying above that park

* Ssanang Setsen, as quoted by Yule
† Coleridge.

where nature has triumphed, may know now, through inherited memory, what its glories were. The walls are mere mounds of earth. The painted buildings and the golden rooms are dust. And the spirits of sculptured dragons, lions and tortoises wander uneasily through the desolation of forgotten dreams, where their earthly forms lie broken.

CHAPTER VI

To Shang Tu there had followed Kubilai many of those Tibetan Lamas who had converted him to Buddhism. They were of the Red Cap sect, as distinct from the Black, which must be described presently, and from the reformed Yellow Cap sect of later years.

They had much in common with the Shamanist witch-doctors of the Mongols and, among their claims to magic powers, which they learned from the Tantras or holy books of India, they professed the ability to conjure fair weather conditions. In this respect they were apparently superior to the Shamans, who, according to the records, only seem to have been able to raise storms.

They had evidently not very seriously imbibed the originally pure Buddhist faith of southern India, for, in spite of its essentially humane law, they sacrificed and devoured in their occult practices the hearts of executed criminals and of sheep. Nevertheless, they were deeply respected by the Mongols, who called them Bakshi or Teachers, and they undoubtedly intrigued Kubilai's attention by such miracles as the restoration of dead bodies to life, or their transformation to gold, the power to penetrate everywhere like air, to float in space or to make water flow backwards.

Theirs was certainly the oldest knowledge in the world, the knowledge of super-adepts, and, though they professed Buddhism and followed to a certain extent the reformed doctrines of Sakya Muni, theirs was a faith more ancient and more mystical. They lived like ascetics, their morality grave and unquestionable, their only nourishment parched barley steeped in water and their heads shaved. They founded two large monasteries of their Order at

Shang Tu. Here, in their saffron-coloured robes, they turned their prayer wheels and burned their sticks of expensively perfumed incense, or built and buried in the ground small turrets of these joss sticks, further enriched with pounded gold, silver, pearls and coral.

On each side of the Red Caps were two heretical sects. Of these, the Black Caps or Bonpos, who practised a dreadful naturism combined with ancestral worship, closely resembling the oldest cults of India but borrowing from Buddhism, did not interest Kubilai so much as the Taoists, who managed to combine in a decadent mixture the tenets of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Christianity. He was aware that the Taoists owed most to Brahmanism, since their Chinese founder, Laotze (for whom they claimed a divine birth), had merely formulated, five hundred years before Christ, the contemporary Indian doctrine of the Upanishad. Aware, too, that the Red Cap teachers seemed to have more respect for the Black Cap heretics, who actually rejected the gentle Sakya Muni, than for the Taoists who gave him a place among their divinities and yet remained completely separate from the Buddhist Lamas, his curiosity was sufficiently aroused for him to send for and question a Taoist priest.

The man came from one of the two Taoist monasteries that had also been founded at Shang Tu. He had lately returned from a pilgrimage in China, for all of his sect led wandering lives and he, like his fellows, was a Chinese. The antipathy between them and the Tibetans was therefore mainly racial.

The Taoist, whose physique was splendid and whose countenance was at once candid and shrewd, wore a slate-coloured robe and his head was shaved at each side, with the remaining hair coiled into a tuft on the crown, in a fashion that recalled the horn of the Lo-lo. Kubilai preferred his appearance to that of the Bonpo Lamas, whose strange dress was a black robe bordered with blue and a tall pointed hat, surmounted by a peacock's feather and a human skull.

"I would learn more of your faith," he said now to the

Taoist. " I am told that you have many gods and that you have much in common with the Black Caps. I have seen their gods, depicted on scrolls and made of baked and painted clay. They are dreadful and hideous ; but I understand that theirs is the cult of terror and of Death, symbolising the awful majesty of Deity. Is yours the same worship ? "

" Nay," answered the Taoist. " The Black Caps are great sorcerers. Theirs is the deeply secret faith and, in all their symbols and practices, they are contrary to us. Our exercises and meditations are normal. We use them only to attain youth and beatitude and to confirm our supernatural power."

" Is that power given to you by your gods ? "

" In part. One of our gods is called the High Emperor of the Sombre Heavens. In his honour is practised the ancient Indian ceremony of walking barefoot on fire, striking at invisible devils with straight swords and even of wounding oneself."

" I have never seen that ceremony," said Kubilai.

" It has great significance," said the Taoist. Then he added brightly : " We have, of course, many other gods. Some reside in the stars and control their movements ; others manifest themselves on earth. All have wives and children, courts and courtiers, so that I can hardly tell you their number, but all are happy and beautiful."

Kubilai realised then that the fairy-like pantheon of immortals that Chinese art so often portrays—the genie floating on clouds, the dragons of sea and sky and the goddesses enshrined in lotus flowers—were of Taoist origin. And he thought that this child-like superstition surely accounted for the reflection that he had heard cast on Taoism, that it was responsible for a loose morality and for revolutionary politics. But was there no more than this in Taoism ?

" Our faith includes all others and belongs to all people," said the priest, with a shrewd look.

" Then," said Kubilai quickly, " it must be founded on the principle, Jên."

"Assuredly," answered the priest, smiling. "We understand the Nestorian Christians and accept their doctrine of Three Gods in One; we revere our ancestors and know the ancient cult of China, and we see what was good in the teaching of the Lord Buddha. But, behind all these forms, we believe in Tao, the Way, and that belief, which the Old Master Laotze had from Hind, is wholly pure and true. Nothing emanating from Tao is stable, but all things are relative. The sage is the ascetic not in practise, but in mind, and must be withdrawn from the world not in body, but in thought. Only by serving others, only by doing good to all, can he find union with the divine power. Thus life ends in a sleep which is followed by a new awakening."

"Your gods are therefore representations or symbols of Tao, the Moral Law?"

"How can human minds know the Origin and the End, that great Mystery, except relatively and in part?" said the priest. "Listen, and I will tell to you a story of the beneficent spirit, Kuan Yin, Whose cult is the life of our faith, and of a certain poor man who desired a friend."

"I will listen very gladly," said Kubilai, "for I also know what it is to desire a friend."

And this was the story which, in different words, the Taoist priest told, to show that the Infinite can only be revealed on earth in terms of human understanding.

On the outskirts of a small town in north China, there once lived a poor but pious old man, who was a carver of wood. And, because he had the soul of an artist and preferred to carve hard wood into the merry or malevolent faces of genie, or into the significant coils of dragons, or into the delicate forms of fruit and flowers, he had abandoned the honourable and more lucrative profession of coffin making that should have been his. Moreover, since he had never married a wife or adopted a child, he had no solace for his advancing years, and was now destitute and very much alone.

But he had a merry heart. He loved wine when he could get it, more than food.

And he was a good Taoist: that is to say, in the front room of his poor hut, he paid honour to his ancestral tablets, he never failed to make suitable offerings to the spirits of the hearth and of the door-posts and he prostrated himself before the Pole Star, which is the residence of the Supreme Being. In one corner he had a little shrine with a lamp burning before a naïve wooden figure made by himself, which he called Jesus the Saint, and in another corner he had a second rather dusty little shrine, with no lamp, containing one of the many ugly Chinese representations of the Buddha in brass.

It will be seen, therefore, that he was a very pious man and left nothing to chance.

But, because he was lonely, he had a secret desire for a friend. And he never mentioned this desire to any acquaintance in the town, lest they should twit him with having no son, or lest they should gravely and kindly advise him to return to the making of coffins (for which he had no taste) and thereby earn enough money to procure a wife for his declining years.

He was sure that the last was what they would say, for he had great faith in the kindliness of human nature and its unfailing desire to help.

So, instead of confiding his loneliness to any other man, in his back room, where he carved wood, he hung the lamp that should have burned at the little shrine of the Buddha before another figure of common white porcelain, which he called Kuan Yin, He Who perceives repentance, prayer and supplication.

Kuan Yin stood on an open lotus flower and His robe fell in classic folds and He smiled without malice. And He was all things to all men; King or Woman or Child, according to the personality of His supplicant. But to the Wood Carver He was a friend.

The realm of Kuan Yin was the Pure World in the West, beyond all other worlds, where it is perpetual spring and where all men are young and happy. And the

Wood Carver adored Kuan Yin and told Him very often how much he would like to go to this Pure World and become young again.

The only trouble was that Kuan Yin never answered. Only His mysterious and gentle smile comforted the loneliness of the Wood Carver.

Then one day a large black rat ran over the shelf where Kuan Yin stood, and the little figure of common white porcelain fell to the floor and was broken to bits. Only the open lotus flower was left intact. And that the Wood Carver replaced on the shelf and imagined the smile of Kuan Yin above it, and left the lamp burning before the actual flower and the imagined smile.

But, while he thought of the smile of Kuan Yin and the kindness of Kuan Yin and the mystery of Kuan Yin, Who is the Divinely Infinite and therefore unknowable, and the goodness of all men and therefore familiar, it came to him that he might be able to make another little statuette, of wood, showing Kuan Yin as a friend. And, having this idea, he worked on it for a year and a day, discarding one effort after another and labouring with patience and with love.

When the statuette of wood was at last finished it was three inches in height. But it was indeed Kuan Yin.

Then the Wood Carver set Kuan Yin again on the open lotus flower and prostrated himself and invoked his friend. And, having prayed thus, he sat back and meditated, and his soul was withdrawn from this world.

The Wood Carver sat thus in meditation night and day, and at last it seemed to him that a radiance, not of the little lamp before Kuan Yin, shone over the statuette and that gradually it became more and more diffused, till it filled his poor back room.

Then the lotus flower of common white porcelain trembled into life and was tinged with rose colour and grew from a green stalk and threw forth two lovely buds, that burst into full blooms of surpassing beauty. But the tiny wooden statuette of Kuan Yin still rested in the heart of the central lotus flower.

The Wood Carver cried, "O Kuan Yin! show me Thyself!"

And lo! Kuan Yin appeared to the Wood Carver, and He was not like any representation of the Divinity that has ever been. But He was lovely, like a song that makes men glad and He was bright like a sword that cuts knots and He was strong like the bond of humanity.

And Kuan Yin spoke to the Wood Carver, as to a friend, merrily, saying, "The statue thou hast made of me is very small."

The Wood Carver answered as to a friend, "My heart is great."

"That is true," said Kuan Yin.

And, suddenly, before the eyes of the Wood Carver, the little statuette he had made began to grow downwards to the floor, upwards to the roof, till it was like a great tree, to which the lotus flowers clung. But its growth did not stop there. For it grew in bulk till its girth filled the room, and it burst through the roof, so that the stars appeared, and its flowing robes were filled with the whispers of all the winds of Heaven and its folded arms were opened to embrace the universe.

The Wood Carver sat at the foot of his statue and the loveliness and the radiance and the strength of Kuan Yin encompassed his being.

"Arise," said Kuan Yin, "go into thy front room and wash thy body and thy robe. Then return here and wait. To-morrow, when the stars appear again, I will come and fetch thee."

Two days later an acquaintance of the Wood Carver from the neighbouring town, knowing that he had no taste for making coffins, and fearing that he might be in want, came to ask him to carve a toroise on a door lintel.

In the poor back room he found the Wood Carver seated on the ground, in an attitude of contemplation, before a tiny statuette of Kuan Yin. He had evidently died recently.

The acquaintance observed that there was a perfume as of spring flowers in the room and that the happy face of the Wood Carver was like that of a young man.

CHAPTER VII

MANGU KHAN had disregarded his own sons and had appointed Kubilai his successor.

At the same time, he had sent to Kubilai this last message: "Continue war against the Sung Empire and take the city of Wu-chang Fu, which lies on the Yangtse river opposite the point where the Han river joins it."

Kubilai therefore left Shang Tu and hastened southwards. He came to the Yangtse and found that river crowded with Chinese war junks and a force of Chinese troops on the other side.

Then the Mongol drums sounded the advance and, swiftly and surprisingly, before the Chinese fleet could interfere, Kubilai transported his army across the great river, dispersed the rest of the enemy and came back to lay siege to Wu-chang Fu.

The campaign against the Sung was to be a long one, and the old struggle for supremacy between north and south has a curious modern counterpart, set in the same area.

The Sung Emperor, at his capital Lin-gnan Fu (the modern Hang-chau), had now good reason to tremble, for he suddenly realised that he was surrounded by treacherous ministers, who had only tried to lull him to a sense of security. Among all his generals, there seemed none who could be trusted except Kia-se-tao. He, with his pleasant, courtly manners and his reputation as a man of letters, was the Sung Emperor's idea of a perfect soldier. So Kia-se-tao was dispatched with a Chinese army to relieve the beleaguered city

Kia-se-tao travelled well in the rear of his army in the utmost dignity and comfort and, if he ever guessed how much he was detested by both officers and men, he was

not troubled by the opinion of the military class that he despised.

He was a man of small stature and of a mean, sycophantic spirit. As he rode in his luxurious palanquin, curtained and cushioned with silk, his soft, womanish, black eyes looked through large shell-rimmed spectacles for nothing but his own advantage. He spent his time during the journey in studying a book of light verses, and in writing; but, as the army neared the field of war, he suddenly called a halt without divulging any reason.

Secretly then, he dispatched to Kubilai, by a trusty messenger, a letter, enclosing the form of a treaty that he had composed.

> "O Great Khan of the Mongols and Emperor of the North!" ran the letter. "Desist from attacking Wu-chang Fu, for my Imperial Master, the Son of Heaven, is willing to acknowledge himself your vassal. He will pay as annual tribute two hundred thousand ounces of silver and two hundred thousand rolls of silk, and he will be content if the Yangtse river remains the boundary of his territory."

Kubilai received this message and important news from the homeland at the same time.

His malicious brother Arikbuga and the Mongol Governor of north China were plotting together to exclude him from his heritage. They would hold a kurultai at Karakorum to elect a new Khan and, if he were not present, his claim would be disregarded. It was therefore necessary to accept the favourable terms offered by the Sung Emperor, through Kia-se-tao, and return to Mongolia without delay.

He signed the treaty, which already bore the seal of the Sung Emperor, a forgery he was incapable of suspecting, and returned a copy of the document with his own seal by the messenger. Then he went off with his cavalry northwards, leaving the Mongol infantry to await Uriangkadai and his army, who were to join them from the south.

With Uriangkadai's original small force of five thousand

men were now additional troops, furnished by the subject peoples he had subdued, raising the total number to thirteen thousand. But when he approached Wu-chang Fu, he heard of the newly made treaty and, honourably disbanding his auxiliaries, he started to cross the Yangtse with his five thousand, meaning to leave the scene of action.

Meanwhile, Kai-se-tao had invited his trusty messenger to dine with him privately. A swift and deadly poison in the last cup of wine that he handed to his guest insured the keeping of the secret. The man staggered out of his presence, and Kia-se-tao, with a smile, held the copy of the treaty in the flame of a burning torch, till no trace of it was left but ashes.

Chinese spies brought word of the movements of Uriangkadai. The small force of Mongols were traversing the Yangtse river on a bridge of boats, and Kia-se-tao was quick to seize his advantage. He sent urgent orders to a flotilla of war junks to burst on the bridge and break it and, at the same time, his impatient army was set free to take the Mongols in the rear and cut them down to a man.

Then Kia-se-tao sent another letter, this time to his Imperial master, the Son of Heaven, reporting that a brilliant Chinese victory had caused the precipitate retreat of Kubilai and the entire Mongol host. Success crowned his efforts.

The Sung Emperor, justified in his choice of so competent a general, summoned Kia-se-tao back to court and showered honours upon him.

Kubilai, in ignorance of what had happened, had got no further on his way to Mongolia than the Central Capital of north China—the place that had been ruined under that name (Chung Tu) when it had belonged to the Kin Empire ; the city that was now being rebuilt almost on its old site and would henceforth be called Ta Tu (Great Capital).

Here he found that Arikbuga from the homeland was making levies of men, animals and money, as though he were already master of the district. Kubilai sent a protest and Arikbuga's soft answer was to beg him to come

quickly to the kurultai at Karakorum. A soft answer may turn away wrath but may also arouse suspicion.

Kubilai was too wise to put his head into any trap. Refusing the urgent invitation on the pretext that he must first post his north China troops on their old cantonments, he went instead to Shang Tu and decided to hold his own kurultai there.

He could not wait for other members of the Imperial family, not even for his brother Hulagu, who was then in Persia. But his adherents were numerous and, without opposition, he was straightway elected Great Khan.

He was, at the age of forty-four, in the prime of life. From a position of small importance and without much ambition, he had won to the supreme control of one half that mighty empire conquered by Chingiz. For, though Arikbuga remained in Mongolia and at Karakorum dared to take Kubilai's title for himself, another year saw his rebellious army utterly defeated in Shen-si, where he had tried to rouse the country against Kubilai.

Then Kubilai withheld all supplies from Karakorum, and Arikbuga, having found among his relatives a western ally, but fearing to attack, left that city. Ever plotting, ever hating the brother who was more of a Chinese than a Mongol, he sent a false message of repentance and allegiance to Kubilai, adding, " I must wait till Hulagu can accompany me, before I can personally pay homage to you."

" If you are sincere, there is no need to wait," said Kubilai sadly. " I look for your allegiance, not as a vassal, but as a brother."

And, having established his sovereignty at Karakorum, he left troops there to escort Arikbuga honourably to China, if he should return, and himself went back to his City of Peace, which had never seemed more desirable.

Here he could rest for a while in the society of his beloved wife, Jambui.

She was a woman who created an atmosphere of serenity. More serious in her youth than most Mongol maidens, she was yet, in older years, more natural than any

of the Chinese ladies of her court. Though always dignified and beautiful, her attraction did not depend on those artifices of etiquette or adornment that marked her attendants. Their stilted mannerisms, as of people so highly cultured that they had forgotten to be simple, contrasted with her spontaneous grace and, beside their doll-like daintiness, heightened by the use of cosmetics till their faces lost all expression, her humanity showed ever fresh and tender.

She loved an open air life more than any luxury and delighted, dressed like a man, to ride with Kubilai on various expeditions. She did not join in his sport, for her pure Buddhist faith, learned, not from the Lama teachers of Tibet, but from Chinese priests, who had kept the doctrine comparatively uncorrupted since its early introduction from southern India, forbade the shedding of animals' blood. But she was tolerant enough to see, that the true joy of sport does not lie so much in killing as in pitting human intelligence against the greater cunning of the wild. Only so could the full beauty and power of creatures that she recognised as fellow mortals be appreciated, and she could understand that the eternal enmity of Nature, appearing as harmony, is reflected in the ardour of the sportsman, who most admires his prey.

Thus, while she was innately civilised, Jambui's charm lay in the fact that she was unspoiled by her ideals. She never posed as a superior being, yet appeared as such, through her unfailing sympathy.

More than in Kubilai's sport, was she interested in his plans for the building of the new Chinese capital, Ta Tu.

This city was to be even more splendid than the ancient Chung Tu, from the ruins of which it would be separated by a river, still running through the Tartar city of modern Peking. It was to rise within a circuit of eighteen miles, having the form of a square enclosed by enormous ramparts of earth, which would be whitewashed, loopholed, pierced with many gateways and crowned with bastions and fortresses. Beyond this outer wall would be the suburbs, where fine hostelries would be built for the merchants

and visitors who flocked to the capital. And within the wall, the streets would be straight, parallel and wide, with spacious palaces, courts and gardens in square plots. Finally, the Imperial palace would be erected, surpassing in magnificence that of any other Emperor, and Kubilai would take up his residence there during the winter.

Jambui said to him, " It must be worthy of you, dear lord. Therefore, will not you lay the foundations of your building in the hearts of your people ? "

" That will I," answered Kubilai.

And he told her how he would cause trees to be planted for the relief of travellers, along every road throughout his dominions, and how further he would organise a great post service by these roads, that his people might profit by the advantages of intercommunication.

" My uncle Ogotai first had the idea, but I will develop it. There shall be post houses and stations everywhere, along the caravan routes as on the main roads, for riders and for runners, so that they may go swiftly and easily. The Chinese understand organisation and will help to develop and maintain the scheme. I have taken their advice already. Much money will be needed, but that can be printed on paper and circulated from Ta Tu."

Jambui smiled at his idealism, which showed itself alike in virtue and in fault.

" Do not be drawn into mistakes by your admiration for the Chinese, my lord," she said.

" I admire their culture," he said. " There are no men so wise as they, and I have ordered the release of all literate prisoners of war, who will be under my special protection. One of them shall be my Minister of State. And yet, Jambui, they do not always seem to understand, although they are so reasonable. I heard of an earthquake in my dominions and asked a Chinese sage the cause of it. He informed me that it was a warning of impending punishment for misrule. And I did not feel that I had yet earned that censure."

" Assuredly not. You are less selfish than most Chinese."

" I wish they liked me better. Perhaps they are jealous of my interest in foreigners. It might please them if I erected at Ta Tu a Hall of Ancestors, where the memorial tablets of our family can be honoured, according to the teaching of their sage Confucius. But I fear they will not forgive me for being a Buddhist, Jambui."

" Ay, it is true that the older Chinese do not love the Buddhists. Long since they called them the Innovators."

" They despise what is new," said Kubilai. " And that is the great difference between us. I look for what is new and fresh. Am not I about to found a new dynasty in China, and shall not I call it Yuen, which is Original ? "

" Call it by that name, my lord, for indeed there has never been any one like you. But remember what I say, that in all your plans and buildings, the foundations should be laid in the hearts of your people. Who are the wise that they should criticise you ? Who are the great that you should seek their flattery ? Among all the millions of north China, there are many whose judgment is sound and honest. And they are those who have been ruined by war and look for a new and beneficent ruler."

Then, with Jambui's help, Kubilai laid further plans for the charitable relief of all poor people in the neighbourhood of Ta Tu and throughout his Chinese dominion.

The great scheme, which has hardly ever been equalled by any ruler, owed its inspiration to Buddhism, the first religion to establish hospitals for the diseased and destitute. As it developed, during Kubilai's reign, he not only fed and clothed the indigent families in his capital, to the number of thirty thousand daily, but all over north China, times of dearth, due to whatever calamity, were regularly reported to him, and the sufferers were then exempt from taxation and were relieved by supplies of corn, seed, or cattle.

If the Imperial sport caused accidental damage to property, no tithe was taken and no customs duty was exacted on that property for a period of three years. Throughout the empire also provision was made against the chance of famine : all corn was bought when cheap

and abundant, stored in provincial granaries and issued, in event of scarcity, far below the ruling price.

In time, therefore, it happened that Kubilai, first Emperor of the Mongol Yuen dynasty of China, had so earned the gratitude of his people that, not only was he known as "very pitiful and compassionate," but it was noted "they worship him as he were God."

But, when the scheme was first inaugurated, a certain story that came to his ears, prevented him from taking any credit to himself and proved to him that Buddhism is based on the same Truth as all other religions—the right relationship of man to his fellows.

A little maiden, whose name, Hsia-hsiang, meaning Summer Fragrance, suggested elusive joy, lived alone with her father in a poor homestead on the outskirts of the suburbs of Ta Tu. Here, before the Mongol invasion, the family had owned long since a prosperous farm. But, during the terrible siege of Chung Tu, they had sought refuge within the walls and, when the city had fallen, they had crept back to find their fields barren, their livestock gone and only the shell of the old buildings remaining.

The grandparents of Hsia-hsiang reached the great limit and her father, weakened by insufficient nourishment in his early years and inheriting no wealth, could not plough the fields or sow the millet for new crops. But he clung to the farmhouse and, since the first duty of a man is to beget legitimate offspring, he presently married a wife more destitute than himself.

This wife gave birth in due time to a daughter and, conscious of the calamity, rejected the world. But the father, whose name was T'ien-sing, rose superior to misfortune and conceived for the child an extraordinary affection, which gradually she returned to such an extent that he came to depend upon her, as though she were a son.

Little Hsia-hsiang tended the house and the garden as well as tending her father.

The living room of the farm was not very clean. On the pillars of the door was painted the Chinese motto:

"The flowers open like wealth and honour." Within, sticks of incense burned before the simple wooden tablets of the grandparents. And in a corner, a small hanging lamp burned before a clay image of Fo,* He Who Perceives, for T'ien-sing was a good Buddhist.

Hsia-hsiang had not, apart from filial obligations, a pious mind. For one thing, she was generally too busy for prolonged religious meditation. For another thing, she had been informed by female neighbours that, if ever she sinned, she would be born again as one of the lowest animals. But, if her lot was to be by chance that of a wild animal, happy and free, she saw in this no dissuasion from sin. Finally, though it was possible that Fo loved all created beings with the heart of a father and a mother, she did not love the aloof image of Fo so much as she loved T'ien-sing, who required all her care.

So, in order to buy the millet that she could not grow to support his strength, she sold flowers from her garden outside one of the southern gateways of Ta Tu.

Suddenly T'ien-sing fell ill. He lay on the bed in the living-room and shivered and burned alternately. With his patient eyes, as of a beast in pain, he looked to his daughter, but she could not relieve him. She was in despair. For several days she watched over him and used all those nostrums and spells that their neighbours advised. He was clearly bewitched. But neither broth boiled at midnight from the head of a toad, a rat's tail and the hair of a new-born infant, nor a plaster made of fowls' feathers and coal-dust laid on the crown of his head at dawn, could restore him.

Hsia-hsiang prayed to Fo. But Fo only smiled and was far away. And, seeing that smile and knowing that Fo did not care, Hsia-hsiang was guilty of a terrible blasphemy. She made a hideous grimace and put out her tongue at Fo.

And still Fo smiled, as aloof from the insult as from her grief.

Then, since she was only twelve years old, Hsia-hsiang wept bitterly and prostrated herself before the tablets of her ancestors, asking them to forgive and help.

* Chinese name for the Buddha.

There was no more food in the house, so Hsia-hsiang had to go forth and sell flowers.

Undoubtedly her grandparents were concerned and helpful. Early in the day they sent a rich man, riding in his sedan chair and preceded by runners, out through the main southern gateway of Ta Tu and caused him to notice the girl with her basket of jessamine. The chair stopped. Two servants picked Hsia-hsiang out of the crowd and brought her to their master.

With an imperious gesture of his beringed thumb, the great man indicated that she should empty the flower basket at his feet. When she obeyed, trembling lest he meant to rob her, he smiled, though without warmth, drew from his sleeve a note of high value and flicked it towards her.

She blessed him shrilly as he was carried on.

She was about to run to the market-place to buy food, when she collided with a blind beggar selling sweetmeats on a tray slung round his neck. He gripped her arm, but instead of beating her with his stick, as she expected, he was pleased to have caught some one obliging enough to lead him to the market, where he also desired to go.

On the way he and Hsia-hsiang conversed volubly. She told him about her father and his illness and about the generosity of the great man.

The blind beggar reminded her that all men are born good.

" He will have been one of the court eunuchs perhaps. They like the perfume of flowers and they often buy sweetmeats. Real men have not those tastes."

Then she told him that the happy event had obviously been due to her ancestors.

" Without doubt," said the blind beggar. " But when you are in trouble you should also pray to Fo, He Who Perceives. And if you went to His holy mountain, one of the western hills, and arrived there to-morrow when the sun rises, He would grant you the greatest wish of your heart."

" That would be to see my honourable father restored to health and strength," said Hsia-hsiang.

"Go then," said the kind sweetmeat seller. "The sacred place, Ya-ki, is rather far away—a good eight hours' walk; but, if you start to-night, you could reach it by to-morrow's dawn. You must go, carrying a lamp to show honour to Fo and, when you see the sun rise from the summit of the mountain, you will also behold the Glory of Fo, which is a great light more brilliant than that of the sun, passing across the mist which lies below the hill. If, as you stand there, your shadow is cast across the Glory, the wish of your heart will be granted. Then you will enter the temple of Fo, which is on the summit and which is not opened till the sun has risen, and present your lamp."

"If I can leave my father I will certainly go," said Hsia-hsiang and, when she had done her marketing, she parted from the blind beggar and sped to her home like a bird.

But alas! she found her father rather worse than better. The unfortunate T'ien-sing was as weak as an infant, and it was out of the question that she should undertake the journey to the holy mountain.

She tended him throughout the day, but all the time she thought of the sacred place Ya-ki, and of the Glory of Fo, and of the wish of her heart, which might have been granted by to-morrow's dawn.

And she did not look at the clay image of Fo, which had no glory but which still smiled.

By the evening she was tired, so she knelt before the ancestral tablets and told the kind grandparents all about it, not forgetting to thank them for what they had already done.

The grandparents were undoubtedly as concerned as ever. They put into the mind of Hsia-hsiang this idea.

"Little Hsia-hsiang, darling child, be not dismayed. He Who Perceives is satisfied with the good intention."

Hsia-hsiang rose from her knees and saw that her father was at last sleeping. Then she turned to the shrine of Fo and bowed her head and humbled her spirit.

"I have offended," she said. "I beg your honourable leave to remove the lamp."

As she took the lamp, it seemed to her that the smile of Fo gave assent.

She remembered that the blind beggar had told her that it was an eight hours' walk to the holy mountain, and that, if she started that night, she could reach the summit by the following dawn. And, as the merit of the pilgrimage lay in its distance, she thought that, if she could traverse the same distance by walking to and fro in her own court-yard, perhaps He Who Perceives would reward her good intention.

She was tired and sleepy. But she went out to the court-yard and set forth on her journey through the night, carrying the lighted lamp and thinking of the Glory of Fo.

"O Fo!" she prayed. "I am little and I am weak, yet the desire of my heart is great. Graciously show me Thyself! Mercifully grant that my miserable shadow may be cast across Thy Glory!"

The journey was arduous. It seemed to her at last that she was struggling through the black and bitter night up a steep hillside. Sometimes she fell from weariness. But always she rose again and went on carrying her little lamp and praying to Fo.

At last, when she had walked for about three hours, she felt she could do no more. She staggered against the wall of the yard and fell on her knees sobbing.

And suddenly there was a strong arm round her shoulders. The strong arm belonged to a shadowy figure that lifted and supported her.

"I am tired," wept Hsia-hsiang. "I want to go to bed but I will go on."

"I will go with you," said the voice of the shadowy figure. "Lean upon me, little Hsia-hsiang."

"You are kind," said Hsia-hsiang, "kinder than the good eunuch at the gate, kinder even than the blind beggar. I do not know you, but I hope you will not leave me."

"I will not leave you," said the voice. "I am the Companion of Travellers."

This voice in the night gave confidence to Hsia-hsiang, and the presence of the Companion renewed her strength.

She leaned against the shadowy figure, which actually supported her, and she told the Companion about her father and about her grandparents.

The Companion seemed to understand everything. When they had walked together a little farther, Hsia-hsiang had a great wish to see the Companion. So she stopped and turned the light of her little lamp upon him.

And lo! His face was one she had never seen before. Though He smiled, His smile was not that of the image of Fo. But it was gay like a flower. Though He was still, His stillness was not that of the image of Fo. But it was strong like deep water. Though He was divinely great, His majesty was not that of the image of Fo. But it was simple like kindness.

"I think," said Hsia-hsiang, "that you are He Who Perceives."

And she leaned against Him and went on, and knew no more weariness.

Next day a party of emissaries from the court of Kubilai Khan rode out to carry charitable relief to all the poor in the neighbourhood of Ta Tu. They came to the farmhouse of T'ien-sing and, when no one answered their summons at the gate, they entered the deserted courtyard and thence passed into the living-room.

Here they found a girl child lying on the floor, fast asleep, before a rude shrine of the Buddha, and, on a bed a sick man, who, when he saw them, put his finger to his lips and cried in the sharp voice of fever: "Hush! Do not wake her! She is Hsia-hsiang, all I have in the world! She travelled through the night for my sake, to behold the Glory of Fo!"

And it was so. For the rich eunuch, who had bought the jassamine from Hsia-hsiang, had also a great wish, which was connected with a palace appointment. He was a Buddhist, and knew that if, as the sun rose, he could behold his own shadow cast across the Glory of Buddha, this wish would be granted. He therefore started long before the dawn and was carried very swiftly in his chair

to the summit of the holy mountain Ya-ki. He saw the dawn rising like fire behind the eastern hills. And athwart the dense white mist that hid the lower slopes, the Glory of Buddha, like a sun encircled by a rainbow, appeared.

But when he looked to see his own shadow cast across the Glory, all he saw was a little fluttering shade like that of a child, a shade that could not be due to his own great height.

And, when he turned sadly away to enter the temple, the priest who opened the door said to him :

" Lord, there has been a great miracle here. Though the door has been locked through the night, some one must have entered. For a little lamp, that was not there before, is already burning before the shrine."

CHAPTER VIII

The house of the merchant prince, old Messer Andrea Polo, stood in the parish of San Felice, in the rich and busy city of Venice.

Though an Italian writer of the thirteenth century said of that city : " You will not find its match in all the world," it had not, in fact, then attained the magnificence which marked it during the Renaissance. Great and wealthy were its trade guilds, enormous its merchandise from every country of the known world, and the Byzantine style of its architecture was glorified by trophies from Constantinople and the Levant. But its narrow streets, where horses and mules were ridden, were unpaved and filthy, no gondolas graced its canals and, while aristocrats like the Polos owned their own boats, the majority depended on the crowded public ferries.

The Venetian state was a democracy and all classes shared in the trade on which it was founded, owning neither castles, domains, nor feudal trains. The Polos, however, having seats in the Great Council of the Republic, were designated in the official resolutions of that Council as Nobilis Vir, signifying that they were of noble blood.

Messer Andrea Polo and his three sons had been engaged in successful commerce and partnership for many years, and the family mansion was commodious, old and picturesque.

It was situated overlooking on one side a dark and narrow waterway and, on the other side, a courtyard behind a malodorous street. In the centre of the courtyard stood a stone cistern, quadrangular in shape and edged with the antique ornament brought from some classic temple. Above the courtyard was a terrace loggia, open

in front but roofed and shut in on three sides and half covered with a climbing vine. The brick façade of the house was ornamented with stone, richly sculptured in the Byzantine Romanesque style and a portico, carried on columns, contained a door of heavy wood studded with iron nails. At one side of the portico was displayed the heraldic shield of the Polos, showing on a field azure, a bend argent and, upon it, three birds sable.

Passing through the doorway, a flight of wooden stairs, at the back of a covered vestibule, led to the loggia on the right, and thence on to a large room that overlooked the canal on the other side.

This room, with its painted walls and its mosaic pavement, was rectangular in shape and dimly lighted, on a summer evening, by tallow candles set in iron sconces. A table covered with a cloth of Egyptian linen and furnished with Venetian glasses, flasks of wine and a silver dish piled with fruit, occupied the space nearest the loggia entrance, and stools and chairs, covered in rose-coloured velvet and pushed back from the table, showed that the inmates of the room had lately risen from a meal.

These people were gathered together near a window above the canal, and a tapestry hanging from a rod and portraying in natural colours the Rape of Europa, with a border representing the phœnix, the unicorn and the fruitful vine, divided them from the further space of the angle. At the foot of this tapestry squatted a hunch-backed Ethiopian dwarf, dressed in yellow silk and wearing a crimson turban adorned with a peacock's feather.

Messer Andrea Polo, a venerable white-bearded gentleman, occupied a high-backed chair, with his back to the tapestry and, from time to time, threw over his shoulder to the dwarf, as to a pet animal, a sweetmeat from the golden dish in his lap.

Of his three sons, only Niccolo, the second, and Maffeo, the youngest, were present. Marco, the eldest, was absent at a house of his own at Soldaia, in the Crimea, where he had gone on a commercial enterprise, connected with the business establishment of the family at Constantinople.

Niccolo, dressed according to the Milanese fashion of the day in a short jerkin and long cloth hose, looked younger and more debonair, although a married man, than the bachelor Maffeo. The two brothers sat one on each side of a small marble table inlaid with precious stones, studying a piece of soiled cotton cloth, on which was painted a world map of the period.

By the barred window, a lady, young, fair and gracious, in a gown of silver brocade girdled with gold, sat holding a scarlet carnation to her lips and gazing at Niccolo, who now and again turned and smiled at her. Her charming name was Fiordelisa Trevisan, her age was sixteen and she was a relation of the Polos.

Mosquitoes buzzed in the hot room and from the water outside rose a stench of decay.

From behind the tapestry came subdued sounds of movement and occasional unsubdued sounds of pain; but no one of the company described took any notice of these sounds.

The atmosphere of the place was at once splendid and squalid, artificial and primitive.

Pointing to the map, Niccolo, the married brother, said to Maffeo, "It is true that, since one half the world is occupied by Asia, the Levant, to its farthest extent, offers a wider field for enterprise than Africa, which, as we know, is only the same size as Europe. Nevertheless, any such enterprise would be attended by serious risks."

"Taking Jerusalem as the centre of the world," said Maffeo, indicating the Holy City, depicted on the map in that position by the figure of a crowned king enthroned on a tower, "it should be possible thence to take a caravan to Baghdad."

"Perfectly possible," agreed Niccolo, "but to pursue the journey towards Seres, the country of silk, remember that it would be necessary to pass through the Realm of Darkness."

"Where it is rumoured that a certain wise and holy friar, John of Piane de Carpine, has already been and returned with encouraging stories," answered Maffeo.

" Doubtless greatly exaggerated," said Niccolo. " One cannot give too much credence to travellers' tales. He may have been bewitched by those very monsters he reported, or tempted of Satan, even as the blessed saints were deceived in the wilderness."

" Perhaps he never reached the impure nations which are shut up with Gog and Magog, behind the barrier of mountains."

" Assuredly not, for we know from the History of Alexander that those mountains are impassable. Moreover, I have heard that Gog and Magog themselves built a mighty rampart on the hither side, to make certain of their own seclusion."

" Yet it is said that the Tartars, who come from those countries, are not really eaters of human flesh and that, though terrible, they are interested in commerce. Also, that their land does indeed comprise the kingdom of Prester John, and that there are many Christians among them."

" The kingdom of Prester John, ay ! " said Niccolo reflectively. " That certainly exists somewhere in the Levant, and it would be worth while to find it."

" Maybe it is in the terrestrial Paradise."

" Maybe. Though I have my doubts about getting there."

" Does not Holy Writ say, ' The Lord planted a garden eastward in Eden ' ? "

" Ay, but remember when Adam and Eve were driven forth, an angel with a flaming sword guarded the way back."

" I would be content so I could see even the angel."

" I make no doubt you would. But the adventure is remote. It likes me not. To be turned back by the angel, after braving monsters, deserts, mountains ! That would be bitter. Our father considers it madness."

" What is that ? " interposed old Andrea.

They told him.

" By our Lady, what extravagance, what childishness is this ! " said Andrea. " What are we coming to ? What

will be the end of honest trade? Have I built up our business for years that it should be dissipated at the world's edge?"

"The idea would be to increase it, sir," said Maffeo.

"Hear him," said Andrea, appealing to the lady Fiordelisa, with outspread hands and a scornful laugh. "Hear the new merchant! He will be saying next that the sun is fixed or that the Ocean Sea surrounding the world is not boundless!"

"Heaven forbid," said Maffeo gravely.

Niccolo and the lady smiled at each other, and it was obvious that no problem of geography was in their thoughts.

But, at that moment, a fresh sound from behind the tapestry arrested the conversation. It was the strange and potential cry of a newborn child—a sound so sudden, though not unexpected, that it seemed to open new vistas to the imagination.

The Ethiopian dwarf fell over on his side as though he had been struck, and rolled his eyes till only the whites were visible.

Fiordelisa dropped her carnation and rose to her feet. They all stared towards the curtain. No one spoke till Messer Andrea, calmly putting a sweetmeat in his own mouth, said, "Well, well; the future is here!"

Presently the tapestry was drawn aside and an old woman appeared, dressed in black and carrying, on a cushion of blue velvet, the naked body of an infant that looked like a wax doll.

"The lady wife of the noble Ser Niccolo is delivered of a beautiful son," she cried in a shrill, cracked voice. "Behold all, the magnificent bambino!"

She advanced and presented the cushion to Niccolo, who gazed at his son with curiosity.

"He appears well formed," was his only remark.

"I should not call him handsome," said Maffeo, laughing.

"Show him to me," commanded Messer Andrea.

And when he was obeyed, he took the cushion on his knee and touched the infant's forehead with his beringed

forefinger. "He has a look of my son Marco. Call him by that name."

The young adventurer, who had lain philosophically sucking his thumb, now lost it and emitted a strong howl, as though in answer to the name his grandfather had given.

"A good omen," said Messer Andrea, chuckling. "He agrees to be Marco Polo."

"How fares it with my lady wife?" inquired Niccolo of the old woman.

"Alas, badly! It is a great misfortune. She is even now at the point of death. The Reverend Fathers have been summoned."

Niccolo gave a shout of anguish and rage.

"My God! And I never knew! What horror! What calamity! My father, hear! This life has cost one far more precious. Maffeo, help! I shall die also. Fiordelisa, farewell! I cannot survive her!"

He leant his head on Maffeo's shoulder and wept with the unrestrained and histrionic emotion of the Latin.

Fiordelisa took his hand and held it. . . .

But the young Marco Polo, on Messer Andrea's knee, he who was to make a new geography, found his thumb again, meanwhile, and was content.

Niccolo Polo did not die, as he had threatened, but instead left his son to the sympathetic care of the lady Fiordelisa, and himself went off with his bachelor brother, Maffeo, to their business house at Constantinople.

That great centre of commerce between East and West, the mart of the world, was then under the dominion of a Latin Empire, a period particularly favourable to the Venetians, and one when their hated rivals of Genoa and Pisa took second and third places. The Venetian merchants, consequently, made of Constantinople a second home and, among them, few were more affluent or more secure (having interests which spread to the Crimea) than the Polos.

But when commercial enmity culminated in the Venetians driving the Genoese out of Acre (where the

latter had for long been all powerful) after bloody fighting, in which every good Christian Crusader, Templar and Knight took part, the Genoese renewed old treaties with the Greeks of Byzantium to undermine Venetian influence.

The Latin Empire, threatened by this alliance, under the leadership of the Greek, Michael Palealogus, was tottering, when Niccolo and Maffea decided that it would be wise to leave Constantinople in time and join their brother Marco at Soldaia.

They converted their wealth into easily portable jewels, set forth across the Black Sea and eventually landed at that port, which lay on the south-east coast of the Crimea, a country then under Mongol-Kipchak rule, taking its name from the Emir, Krim, who governed it.

Brother Marco made them welcome at his house, agreed with them that the presence of so many slave-dealing Genoese at the adjacent port of Kaffa was insufferable and recommended them, after a time, to proceed through the interior country, which belonged to the Goths, till they reached the great city of Sarai, on the Volga, founded by Batu Khan, and now the residence of Batu's brother, Barka Khan.

"Is he not a barbarian?" they asked.

Marco the elder laughed the idea to scorn.

"He is a liberal and courteous prince, and his palace, surmounted by a great golden crescent and surrounded by walls and towers, would make many palaces in Venice look small."

So on they went to Sarai, where Barka was pleased to see them and treated them with great honour.

Niccolo and Maffeo improved the shining hour to the extent of selling all the jewels they carried to Barka, for double their value, and remained at the court of Sarai for a year.

Then it was time to go home; not to Constantinople, for the Genoese, supporting the new Emperor Michael Palealogus, were now supreme there, and not to Soldaia, where Brother Marco lingered, though the slave dealers

from Kaffa were thrusting, but to Venice and to the lady Fiordelisa and to young Marco.

But the war, which began when " the Almighty Artist " and " the Furrier of Winter " prepared the ground between the forces of Barka Khan and Hulagu, was now in progress, and the straight way home was closed.

" No matter," said Maffeo, the enterprising. " Let us go farther afield. Do you not remember, brother, the talk that we had long since about the chance of winning to the kingdom of Prester John ? "

" An idle dream," said Niccolo, to whom the recollection of that occasion was still painful. " But," he added hopefully, recalling the map they had then studied, " if we travel southwards, we must at last reach Jerusalem and, since the Holy City is at the centre of the world, from there we can start afresh."

Hardy adventurers both ! They had no compass and they had no chart ; but, coming from a seafaring race, they trusted themselves to the wild and steered their way by the stars. And the Aurora Borealis, that lights the northern skies, was their inspiration and travellers' tales were their guide.

They crossed the Volga at Ukek (not far from modern Saratov) and they traversed the steppes and the empty desert for sixty days, and no one was more surprised than they when they arrived at last, not at Jerusalem, which surely should have been hereabouts, but at a " very great and noble city called Bocara."

Bokhara had been rebuilt since Chingiz had ravaged it, but was still considered to belong to Persia, and was now under the khanship of a descendant of Jagatai, the son of Chingiz.

The war that Hulagu had waged against the Assassins and against the Khalif at Baghdad, had left the whole country in a very unsettled state, so that the brothers, having reached this point, found " that they could neither proceed farther forward, nor yet turn back again ; wherefore they abode in that city of Bocara for three years."

A strange and illuminating sojourn that must have

been; one that transformed two merchants of the Latin race, who knew not much more of the Levant than the coast of Syria, into two citizens of a greater world than Venice and Byzantium. On the threshold of that world, looking farther eastward to hitherto unimagined vistas, they paused, assimilating new impressions and waiting.

For the chance to leave it all and continue homeward? Or for a stranger chance?

It came, the great opportunity, the clear indication to their footsteps; it came, with the coming to Bokhara of envoys, who had been dispatched by Kubilai Khan to Hulagu and now stopped there, on their way back to Shang Tu.

The hard bitten warriors of Kubilai, among whom was the young General, Bayan of the Hundred Eyes, who had fought in southern China, rode into Bohkara and, in the crowd of mixed nationalities that watched them pass, stood Niccolo and Maffeo Polo.

Bayan, sitting his horse like one born to the saddle, tall, lean and noble, a leader of men, with his dark clean cut features and his keen hawk eyes, noticed them first. And Bayan was surprised to see foreigners of such an odd and independent type; their skin lighter than that of most, their attitude more proud and princely than their old, travel stained garments and their lack of attendants warranted. In fact, so struck was he, that he dismounted forthwith and asked them whence they came.

The Polos conversed with Bayan, having learned his language at the court of Sarai, and their respect was mutual.

"If the way were open," said Bayan, "would you return now to your own country?"

"No," said Maffeo boldly, and looked to Niccolo.

"I should stay here a little longer and learn more," said Niccolo, "for indeed this seems like a doorway leading to undiscovered countries."

"To the kingdom of Prester John," said Maffeo eagerly.

"And who is he?" said Bayan.

"Do not you know Prester John, the great Christian potentate?" they asked.

"I have heard old stories," said Bayan; "but the name of the great Khan whom I serve, and there is none greater, is not John, but Kubilai. And though Kubilai has seen many other foreigners, none of them were quite like you. Consequently he would welcome you at his court, for he is ever eager to learn what is new and strange."

"Can we trade in his country?" said Niccolo the merchant.

"As you have never traded before," said Bayan, laughing. "The riches of the whole world come to Cathay and my master lives in such splendour as you perhaps have never seen. Why, gentlemen, if you will heed me, you will gain honour and profit beyond all dreams."

Niccolo and Maffeo drew aside and consulted together. Maffeo trembled with excitement. In the mind of the more sober Niccolo, the remembrance of the lady Fiordelisa waned.

At last they approached Bayan again.

"Speak on, sir," said Niccolo gravely, "for indeed your words are of interest to us, who are honourable traders of noble blood, with our fortunes still to make."

"Listen, then," said Bayan enthusiastically, "for, whatever you call yourselves, I can see that you are brave men, and we Mongols are the friends of all that brotherhood. For a few days, we tarry in this city of Bokhara to fit ourselves for the further long journey. When we start again, come with us to the court of Kubilai Khan, at Shangdu Keibung. We will conduct you safely, and you shall surely find the end worth your while."

Then two gentlemen of the West swore comradeship with a gentleman of the East, and there was no barrier of race or faith between them, but, in a short time, trusting each other, they rode together out of the city of Bokhara.

CHAPTER IX

They went northwards through the frontier town of Otrar, where the Polos heard for the first time how, over fifty years before, five hundred honest Mongol merchants, sent by Chingiz, had been foully murdered.

"Wherefore," said Bayan, "the Very Mighty, in revenge, carried fire and sword through the length and breadth of what was then the Kwaresmian Empire."

The two brothers, who knew well that, in the good days of the Fourth Crusade, Doge Enrico Donaldo had taken and sacked Constantinople for not so good a reason, were duly impressed.

Then they went on by Lake Isi-Kul and the Dzungarian Gate and took the Great North Road, the route traversed by Friar John of Piane de Carpine but unknown, besides, except to eastern travellers.

The journey should have taken them not more than six months, but they must have lingered on the way, for double that time elapsed before they approached Kubilai's City of Peace.

The wonder of the Polos at finding no monsters, no cannibals, and no amazons on the way, but instead regular posting houses and hospitable tribesmen, who regaled them with their own diet of mutton and distilled mare's milk, must have been a sufficient reason for the delay.

But, when they reached Shang Tu and saw the marble palace and the pavilion of golden bamboo, they knew that, though this might not be the abode of Prester John (who, indeed, according to Bayan could now only be identified in one of his descendants, an obscure princeling, who had been christened Körguz or George by the Nestorians), it was certainly the realm of a potentate quite as mighty.

They wanted to know whether Kubilai was a Christian, and heard that, not only did he tolerate all creeds, like his grandfather Chingiz, but that his interest in all was lively.

"He has, perhaps, a preference for the teachers that have come from Tibet and now surround him, and also he listens to the Chinese Buddhists for the sake of the Empress, Jambui Khatun. He has now four wives, but she is the first and favourite."

The Polos were informed that Kubilai would receive them in the audience hall of the bamboo palace and that, when they entered it to await him, they must on no account tread on the threshold or even touch one of the silk ropes that stayed the building. They inquired why.

"Because," said their Mongol cicerone, grinning, "two big men stand on either side the entrance to strip and beat any one who errs in this respect."

An excellent reason that they should conform to the rule, but hardly one that explained it. Was this Emperor, whose majesty they saw reflected in the magnificent city, and in teeming courtiers and warriors, who seemed drawn from every country of the Levant, only a barbarian after all? Surely not, for he sent them continual messages of the most cordial welcome and the expression of his desire to show the two foreign gentlemen the highest honour.

On the day of the audience, Chinese servants, set at their disposal, conducted them, at early dawn, to marble baths of heated water, after which their limbs were massaged by Persian slaves, their hair and beards were curled and scented, and they were dressed in new silk robes. Then a court chamberlain led them ceremoniously to the bamboo palace where, sure enough, they saw the strong reason why they must not tread on the sacred threshold and where they were ushered into an apartment, glorious with multi-coloured Chinese silk needlework and antique bronze vases on stands of red lacquer.

At one side, there was a square gilded coffer carved with exquisite workmanship, in the hollow centre of which stood a wine butt of pure gold, and at each corner of which

were smaller flagons, goblets and bowls. Near this coffer were ranged Chinese waiting-men, who wore napkins of silk and gold tied over their mouths and noses. On the other side of the room, musicians seated on a Persian carpet played softly on stringed instruments.

Suddenly, from outside, came the sounds of horses' hoofs, rolling wheels, cracking whips and shouting voices. Three chamberlains now entered with interpreters: one took Niccolo by the hand and led him to the right side of the room, the second led Maffeo to the left side and the third waited near the doorway.

Two heralds carrying halberds appeared, then the captains of Kubilai's bodyguard (a force, the brothers learned later, of twelve thousand noble Mongols, who were all descendants of the four best friends of Chingiz Khan) then a body of courtiers, richly attired, and finally servants carrying white staves tipped with scarlet wool, who cried with a loud voice, "To the right and left, make way for the Imperial party!"

When the company had thus divided, leaving the brothers in the forefront, some of the servants shouted, "Salute profoundly!" and others thereupon cried, "Bow!"

At the first order every one present, including two tactful gentlemen of the West, fell on their knees; at the second order they all bowed their heads three times to the ground. Again the tipstaffs shouted, "Salute profoundly! Rise!" Again the heads were lowered and then lifted. For the third time the same order was given and obeyed. And while the kow-tow was thus performed, Kubilai, the Great Khan, leading by the hand his beloved consort, the lady Jambui, entered.

He had now reigned for five years and, for him, the arrival of the Polos was a momentous occasion, worthy of the utmost display of pomp. He still remembered how, when he was a small child, his grandfather, Chingiz, had said to him, "Which is better, little man, to rule a great empire or to be the friend of strangers from afar?" And further, how Chingiz had said, "I have dreamed a dream,

Kubilai, of you and three birds, foreign birds of black plumage . . . one of these shall bring you great renown ! "

So, when he heard that the name of the gentlemen who had come from the West, even from the famous empire of Ta Ts'in, signified in their own language some kind of bird, he knew that the prophecy of Chingiz would be fulfilled. He was rather surprised that there were not three Polos, but he would learn more. Meanwhile, these two were no mendicant friars, such as had visited Cousin Kuyuk and Brother Mangu, to speak of incomprehensible doctrines, but men of a world as great or greater than his own, who could converse intelligently in the Mongol language.

To show them honour, he wore the robes and headdress of the Son of Heaven, whose title he assumed as Emperor of north China. The outer robe was of sky-blue silk, lined with flesh colour, bordered with four bands of beaten gold and embroidered with clouds and dragons. His underdress, shaped like an apron and confined by a girdle sewn with pearls, was of scarlet crêpe brocade, also richly embroidered. His soft black silk cap, worked with a design of swallows and willow trees and bordered with pearls, was caught back at the ears with bows of yellow silk, ending in rings of jade, and was surmounted by a flat board, oblong and stiff, from which hung a fine red silk fringe.

The Empress and her attendants also wore light blue robes, with varying decorations and jewels, and the headdress of all the Mongol ladies was their own graceful national Botta : a flat scarf of silk tied tightly round the hair and, at the back, a wedge-shaped block of wood covered in silk, from which sprang peacock's feathers or long quills.

The immediate attendants of Kubilai wore blue as well, and this uniformity of colour in the dress of the Imperial party gave an impression at once harmonious and striking, as of massed flowers under an azure sky.

Kubilai seated himself on a throne of ivory at one end of the room, the ladies stood on his left and the courtiers

on his right, and the captains of the guard took up their positions at the doorway.

Then, while the musicians played, wine was handed to all by the waiting men from the golden butt, with flagons and goblets. All drank three draughts and, when this was finished, the music stopped, and the chamberlain presented the two brothers to Kubilai.

They knelt before him, but he leaned forward and took a hand of each and raised them and smiled.

"Gentlemen," he said, "surely we should be friends. For, though you have come to me from the end of the earth, I feel that I have known you for long."

Later he entertained them at a magnificent banquet, after which Chinese jugglers performed and, aided by the arts of the Red Cap Lamas, caused golden goblets filled with wine to float through the air from the sideboard to the Khan's table. This feat of sorcery (which followed copious drinking and was immediately preceded by strange incantations and gesticulations of the Red Caps, who also stared fixedly into the eyes of guests who were to behold the miracle) greatly surprised the two brothers, and Kubilai was flattered by their amazement.

"These Teachers," he said, "certainly excel the Shamans and the Nestorians. That is why I have accepted their faith. But, gentlemen, I believe that you belong to a different Church. Tell me about it and about your priests."

Gravely they told him, with some reservations, about His Holiness the Pope, but not about his rivalry with the Holy Roman Empire; about the sanctity of Mother Church, but not about the mysteries of her doctrines.

"And the empire of Ta Ts'in, is it as large as my empire? The city that you call Rome, is it bigger than Shang Tu?"

They described the Latin Empire of Byzantuim, touched on politics and commerce, pictured the Grecian archipelago, and took him in imagination, rowed by their galleys, up the Adriatic, till they came to Venice and the palace of the Doge.

He wanted to know all the customs of the Latins ; he asked about the emperors, kings, princes and other potentates of the West ; he was eager to hear about the Crusaders, but wondered to think they should fight more furiously among themselves than against any infidel.

" Although your Pope is called Holy Father, it does not seem, then, that all Christian peoples are united as brothers ? "

" Unhappily no, Sire, but that is the aim of the Christian religion."

" Ah ! like myself, you seek Jên—the secret of civilisation, the right relationship of man to his fellows—but have not yet attained it."

" That is true, Sire."

" I knew we should understand each other," cried Kubilai in delight. " We must talk further of that uniting Word. It is surely the power that has brought you here."

They talked much further. They were continually together and Kubilai could hardly bear the Polos out of his sight. They discoursed of religion, of war and of peace. The two brothers found the Great Khan a wise and noble man, and he delighted in these well-informed and courteous gentlemen of the West.

They stayed for a year, and at last he said to them, " I have it in my mind to ask you to accept an honourable appointment."

" Sire," said Niccolo, " we will serve you faithfully."

" The appointment is that you two shall go as ambassadors from me to your lord the Pope."

" Seeing that we are not Mongols, Sire, but Latins, might it not be more fitting to send one of your own barons ? "

" I would send with you a captain of my bodyguard. He, being noble, would be my representative and he would also conduct you safely. But it is for you to accept the mission and explain it. I would send a letter by your hand to the Pope, begging him to dispatch to me one hundred good and learned men, who can clearly expound the Christian faith. They must be men qualified in controversy,

for they will meet not only our Shamans and the Teachers of Tibet and able Nestorians, but also the priests of Islam and the Chinese philosophers, who despise all but their own ethics."

"Indeed, Sire, it is a marvellous and worthy mission. May it be suggested also that the Holy Father should send men of secular knowledge, duly acquainted with the seven arts of Rhetoric, Logic and Grammar, and of Arithmetic, Astronomy, Music and Geometry? Thus, in these branches of wisdom besides religion, East and West may meet for mutual improvement."

"Well said," agreed Kubilai. "Let it be so. But, before all, understand that I chiefly desire to learn the whole truth and foundation of the religion of Christ. From what you have already told me, I gather that this is a very pure and perfect faith, and, if it can be proved to me that it is better than any other, I and all my people will discard our former beliefs and be baptized as Christians. You will represent to your Pope that my temporal alliance would be valuable to him. You will say, moreover, that it is practically a question of the religious conversion of nearly the whole of Asia, since my empire will be vaster than it is now."

"Sire," said Niccolo, "when we started to find you, we never thought how the journey would end. I tremble with joy to think of what this means. You are, indeed, one gifted with vision and we are blessed to be chosen as your emissaries."

"When we return to you, Sire," said Maffeo, "as we surely will, in the company of the one hundred divines and scholars that the Pope will gladly send, we will stop on our way at Jerusalem, the Holy City, in order to take and bring you some of the oil of the lamp, which burns on the Sepulchre of our Saviour."

"The which," added Niccolo, gravely explaining, "is considered by us a very sacred talisman."

"I thank you both," said Kubilai warmly, "and, when you come again, I will thank you still more, for the pleasure of your presence, quite as much as for any talisman."

Then he presented them, as a token of high favour and honour, with a round tablet (or Päiza, as he called it) of pure gold, encrusted with three pearls and engraved with the figure of a falcon and the words, " By the strength of the eternal Heaven ! May the name of the Kakhan be holy ! Who pays him not reverence is to be slain and must die ! Our imperial order for post horses ! Urgent ! "

This was to be their safe conduct throughout Mongol dominions and, by its use, they would be ensured provision of anything they might require on the homeward journey.

Finally, the captain of the guard, who was to accompany them and save them all trouble, was introduced—a fine young Mongol aristocrat called Cogatal, who, in his court robe of purple silk, decorated with precious stones and girdled with gold, and in his high boots of red leather, embroidered with silver thread, appeared a kingly and reliable figure.

" God bide with you and bless you, Sire," said the two brothers to Kubilai, when they took their leave.

" Heaven smile on you, gentlemen, and bring you safely back to me," said Kubilai to them.

But not long after they had started, Cogatal, the captain of the guard, fell seriously ill and, though he tried to proceed, a day came when he could no longer sit his horse.

The brothers were dismayed at his sufferings, but would not turn back and thus delay their mission. Cogatal was even more dismayed at the thought of leaving them, when they had been trusted to his charge, but there was no help for it.

They left him in the next city they passed and went on, alone and unafraid, rejoicing in the chance that had, on a day, brought Bayan of the Hundred Eyes to the city of Bokhara, to fulfil a dream beyond their wildest ambitions.

CHAPTER X

On their homeward journey, they trusted to the tablets of authority that Kubilai had given them and to their own good sense. The tablets were highly efficacious, for they provided everything that the Polos chose to command in any town, village, or encampment through which they passed. But their good sense does not seem to have included a well developed sense of direction. For though, in coming by the Great North Road, they had taken no more than a year on the journey from Bokhara, they took three years to return.

Their excuse was that they were often hindered by heavy snow or rainfall and by impassable torrents. It is possible therefore that, instead of taking the comparatively easy North Road, they went by the Great South Road, along the basin of the Tarim and across the high desert plateau of the Pamirs.

So at last they would have stumbled thankfully once more on Bokhara, where they would have found caravans going to Baghdad and Tauris, both great commercial centres. The important seaport of Armenia called Ayas was then their natural aim, as it was the chief place for the shipment of Asiatic wares to the Italian republics, and one where the Venetians had their own resident bailo or consul. The place is now nothing but a poor village occupied by Turcomans, but it was then a splendid city, the connecting link between Syria and Europe, where, on Christian ground, the Frank trafficked openly with the Saracen, despite Papal prohibition, in spices, silks and even in the arms of war.

The Polos rested at Ayas, but not for long, as they heard there important news.

The Pope Clement IV at Rome had lately died and,

as they were the emissaries of Kubilai to the reigning Pope, it was necessary that they should hasten to Acre, where notable Churchmen congregated, to learn when a new Pope would be elected.

At Acre, the Venetians were paramount since their expulsion of the Genoese. It was therefore easy for the Polos to gain audience of an important personage there, the ecclesiastical Legate for Egypt, an Italian dignitary of great authority, called Teobaldo Visconti.

This gentleman, indeed, made them welcome and seemed ready to listen to their amazing story. But, as he heard their voices, trembling with eagerness, and as he looked on their grave faces, burned with radiant snows and shadowed with the hazards of their frightful journey, the Legate, who with all his learning, had no experience of such things, grew slightly more dignified and remote in manner. Of course he did not doubt the Polos, though his rather glassy stare was sceptical. He knew all about the journeys that Friar John of Piane de Carpine and Friar William of Rubruck had made to the country of the Tartars and the courts of the Mongol Khans, and the testimony of those holy men had proved conclusively that the Mongols were barbarians. The brother of Mangu Khan, Kubilai, now reigning in China, might be better than his predecessors—his expressed desire to learn more of Christianity certainly indicated that point. But, in describing his virtues and his nagnificence, the two brothers were undoubtedly influenced by the idea of Prester John.

"Are you sure," said Teobaldo, "that it was not really Prester John who received you and perhaps, for his own purpose, concealed his identity?"

Here was an astute notion to solve the problem.

"We are quite sure, Eminence. The great Khan does not yet confess the faith, and Prester John, with all his magnificence, is now dead."

"That," said Teobaldo, waving a large white hand, "is impossible, since we know that he is immortal; and who are we to gauge his wisdom? Kubilai may be an idolater, but if, as you say, he rules a great empire, his

conversion would be of some honour and advantage to Christendom. Do he and his people live in tents, like the rest of the Tartars ? "

Niccolo and Maffeo attempted to describe the glories of Shang Tu.

" Indeed," said Teobaldo, with his glassy stare, " such splendour sounds very strange. Even the Doge at Venice hardly lives in such luxury."

" Sir," answered Niccolo, " what we call luxury in the Ponent would seem like squalor to the Great Khan."

" Extravagance is one of the besetting sins," said Teobaldo, who lived as richly as he could and cherished secret ambitions. " And exaggeration is the broad road that leadeth to destruction."

" If you had been with us, Eminence," said Maffeo, " you would have seen that no exaggeration could match the truth."

" The glory of God is the only truth that I desire," said Teobaldo unctuously.

" Amen," said Niccolo. " For that glory, then, tell us, sir, how we should proceed on our mission ? For we have been long on our homeward journey, and with what we have seen, heard and felt during that journey, things strange and dreadful past belief, we will not trouble you. Only this will I say, that, though the last three years have been hard, what lies behind them was so splendid, that we want only to repeat the journey and return to the Great Khan as we promised."

Teobaldo considered the question. He wondered whether the Polos had really ever travelled as far as they pretended. Perhaps their whole adventure was some wild dream ; perhaps they were afflicted with madness or had been bewitched by demons in the Syrian deserts.

He waved his white hands again.

" Gentlemen, your mission is to His Holiness the Pope. But, as you know, His Holiness has departed this life. Wherefore, you can only wait with patience until a new Pope is elected."

" When will that be, sir ? " said Maffeo bluntly.

"How can I say? Christendom is in a parlous state. There are wars and rumours of wars, dissension on every side, so that unity of opinion is difficult."

"Who is expected to succeed to the Holy See, Eminence?"

Teobaldo looked aside, smiled softly and shook his head.

"Only he who can be recognised as combining saintliness with wisdom," he answered.

And his expression revealed a consciousness of piety and of intellect. Though diverging opinions might prolong the election over this question, there was no doubt in his mind.

"Until the matter is settled, then," said Maffeo, "we had best go on our way home to Venice. It will be worth while to see our own people once more and to find out, brother Niccolo, how your young son prospers."

"Why, yes," said Niccolo. "I had well-nigh forgotten that young son of mine."

"Well thought on, gentlemen," said Teobaldo. "My blessing goes with you, and may you speedily recover from your trials. If I can assist you in any way later, do not hesitate to ask me. I am already honoured by your confidence."

Thus, with a smooth tongue and a happy heart, he dismissed them, for facts and dreams that were for him of more importance.

In the old Ca' Polo at Venice, the boy Marco had passed fifteen years of his life. The head of the house was his old grandfather, Ser Andrea, who was becoming slightly senile. The chatelaine was Ser Andrea's ward, the lady Fiordelisa Trevisan, whom Marco as a small child had loved, because she was young, fair and sprightly.

But, as the years passed, the gay youth of Fiordelisa faded and her sprightliness became shrewish. No one now sought her hand in marriage and, at the advanced age of thirty-two, she could abandon hope of any suitor. She did not appear old so much as dim. She had the aspect of

a pale, drenched flower, with her flowing ash gold hair, her dark eyes, scorched with weeping and her thin pink lips.

She had adored the infant Marco and, during all his babyhood, had cherished the fancy that he, the bambino, was her sacred charge and that she, in him, was blessed as a virgin mother. It was this fancy which had caused her passionately to reject the proposal of any marriage that Ser Andrea might have arranged for her, and he had not pressed the point.

As his age increased, therefore, the servants of the household, comprising serving men, pages and female slaves from the East, were nominally under the orders of Madonna Trevisan, but actually under the strict rule of a lemon-faced seneschal or major-domo, who, through heredity tenure of the office, had identified himself with the family.

It was his wife who had been the nurse and foster-mother of little Marco ; it was he who arranged, through the parish priest of San Felice, that the boy should receive the education fit for a young signor of the Ca' Polo. And, when the learned but gentle clerk failed to inculcate sufficient discipline, it was the seneschal who belaboured Marco with a stout stick, as impartially as he would have chastised one of the servants.

The lady Fiordelisa, consequently, soon found that a human bambino requires more than mystical adoration and, as her fancy faded and the reality satisfied none of the cravings of her heart, she disregarded Marco and lived in lonely and bitter dreams, occupied only with her distaff, her loom or her lute. Often she would sit for hours in a pensive melancholy, in the terrace loggia overlooking the courtyard. Once the child Marco surprised her weeping there over a dead and blackened carnation and, when he asked her the reason, she hid the thing in her bosom, and, with a wild look, seized her lute and sang :

> " Pleasure of love lasts but a little hour,
> Its taste all sweetness and its dregs all sour,
> Yet, having drunk, who would not drink again,
> Though savour vanishes and dregs remain ? "

This did not interest Marco at all, but, like any other boy, he guessed that, to get rid of him, Fiordelisa might resort, as she had done before, to bribery, in the shape of an errand to a shop on the Rialto, or even a coin with which he might buy some fruit or comfits.

So, like any other boy, he slyly made of himself a pest.

"Sweet Madonna, what did your song mean? . . . Why do you sing, Madonna? Why do you sit here, Madonna, instead of going out? Do not you find it more pleasant on the Piazetta? Tell me a story, Madonna. O gentle Madonna, if you will only tell me one little story, I will stay with you all day!"

And, after several discouraging monosyllables, he had his reward.

"The plague take you!" cried Fiordelisa. "Go out, yourself, boy, and let me be. Here, take this denar* and buy yourself an orange on the Rialto to stop your mouth!"

Marco loved the Rialto better than the gloomy house, better even than the dark waterways and the narrow muddy streets, where, like a rat, he might dart and hide.

On the Rialto, the oldest centre of Venice, it was always gay and light. Here, all the active business of the city was carried on by merchants and mariners. Here, the enchanting shops that edged the fine new wooden bridge, that had been built some seven years since, displayed their scented wares of frankincense and cinnamon, their precious oriental webs, and also all forms of food and fruit. Here also was good company.

Young Marco Polo did not care for boys of his own age, nor perhaps, finding him too serious, did they care for him. He was at heart a man, long before he was fifteen, feeling as no other lad of Venice felt, that, beyond the meaningless drudgeries and the empty amusements of his age, life offered toils more worthy and excitements more vivid. He preferred the company of men; grave merchants who sometimes still came to visit his grandfather and to whose conversation he would sit and listen entranced

* Denari—pennies.

and unnoticed, and, beyond these, the mariners, the hawkers, the boatmen, even the beggars, who, on the Rialto and at every quay, were not too engaged in their real and significant occupations to gratify the curiosity of one idle boy.

These were they who knew Life and had acquaintance with Death. For them poverty, with its strange devices, was a rule; wealth, with its stale custom, was a beacon; pain was a matter of acceptance, rather than of avoidance; pleasure of women was an incident rather than an end.

What filled their bearded mouths with oaths, what shook their roughly clothed bodies, what stirred them, so that they clapped their horny hands and stamped their cloth-bound feet and roared with gusty laughter or wept with maudlin grief, was wine, which somehow they obtained in quantities despite the law restricting its sale: red wine and the company of their fellows and the stories they told.

Such stories, in which Marco lived with them! Stories of stormy seas and spice islands hidden in a glassy ocean, where the monster bird Rukh suddenly appeared, like a terrible cloud in the sky, carrying in its talons a huge long-snouted quadruped called elephant, which it would drop on a merchant ship to sink her like a stone.

Stories of incredible riches in distant lands; buildings of pure gold, streets paved with pearl, people clothed entirely in silk or in jewels, horses shod with silver and decked with gems.

Stories, too, of hair-breadth escapes from tempest, slaughter, torment, fire, famine and pestilence.

And, above all, stories of those strange people, the Tartars, who, it appeared, traded as well as they fought, and among whom, so Marco had heard, his father, whom he had never known, had probably gone long ago to live.

Yes, he would have chosen the Rialto or the quays any day for good company. But when, as sometimes happened,

he wanted to commune with his own thoughts in an atmosphere more serene, and even more gay and light, he preferred the Piazetta.

Here, the gilded bronze horses, brought long ago from looted Constantinople, seemed to frolic in freedom between the pilasters and the square turreted roof of that glorious church that held the bones of blessed San Marco. Here, flags fluttered from the towers of the Doge's palace and pigeons flew through its arcades. Here, sober housewives chaffered in a covered market, where all comestibles were sold, and light but lovely ladies came from their own quarter of Castellato, to loiter by the stalls of itinerant hawkers and to lure from ogling gallants presents of jewels, of sweetmeats, or of sun-kissed fruit.

These ladies, with their bold, elusive glances, like greedy birds, these strutting gallants, in their bright jerkins and skin-tight hose, embroidered with silver and pearls, were for Marco figures of romance.

But finer than they were the Winged Creatures of the Piazetta, which were for him the symbols of all he desired.

At the water's edge, where waves lapped against the wooden quay, two fair columns rose from the brick-paved ground: one, of grey oriental granite, bore the winged lion of San Marco; the other, of reddish-coloured stone, the winged figure of San Teodoro overcoming the serpent.

With wings like theirs, thought young Marco Polo, he would not have stayed even on the Piazetta, but he would have flown far away. The open sea and the ends of the earth called him. He fancied himself carried by such wings on some wonderful journey, to the uttermost bounds of the Levant, farther than any great ship could take him.

Those splendid war galleys, the Brireme, with their double oars to each bench, came to anchor in the harbour, and his heart followed them when they sallied forth, after refitting, against the old and ever hated Genoese enemy.

When, unlike greedy human birds, but like lovely wild

birds skimming the water, they went, painted in gold and vermilion and azure, with flags and pennons flying and drums and horns sounding, there was no sight so glorious. And when they returned, towing into port some vanquished prize, stern foremost, her dejected colours dragging on the surface of the sea, they were greeted with shouts of welcome.

But the huge merchant ships, castellated and armed like the war galleys for offence or defence, spreading their red-brown lateen sails, were no less beautiful.

To the mind of a boy, all these things gave the same idea of urgent and happy flight.

Here, on the verge of the Adriatic, he heard the voices of wind and water calling.

The good company of the quays and the Rialto must have heard those voices too. Therefore it surely belonged to an order more nearly akin than ordinary human beings, to the Winged Creatures of the Piazetta. It was the Company of the Free under the direction of those Winged Creatures.

Some day Marco knew he must join that Company before the world. The only wish that detained him was that he might first find a brother. For there was as yet loneliness on the quays and the Rialto. He was not yet the same as those who had ventured afar, nor, however eager he might be, would they accept him as one of themselves.

Thus reflecting, he returned one day from his wanderings to find commotion in the courtyard of the Ca' Polo. Travellers had evidently just arrived. Servants, under the direction of the seneschal, stood by and chattered; wenches shrieked from the windows.

"It is Messer Niccolo and Messer Maffeo who have returned at last," Marco learned from the excited throng.

And then he had to fly indoors before the seneschal's uplifted stick and the words: "Get you in and wash your face and change your coat to greet your lord father!"

His first instinct was the shy desire to hide and peep on this unknown father. But, at the head of the stairs

leading to the terrace loggia, he caught sight of Madonna Trevisan, and the change in Madonna's appearance was so surprising that he had to stop, staring.

She stood there with her hands on her breast, poised as though for flight, like one of the Winged Creatures. In her blue robe and with her floating pale gold hair, over which stars seemed to shine, lending radiance to her face, she had indeed the aspect of a divine being, a veritable Madonna, the Queen of Heaven from the church of San Felice. Her smiling lips were red, her cheeks were flushed. She was no longer dim and sad. She was transfigured, beautiful.

She held out her hands to him.

"Marco," she cried, "come up, come up quickly! Your father has returned and he is asking for you!"

He went and saw two tall, grave gentlemen of middle age, standing beside the litter on which lay old Ser Andrea in the upper room. He doffed his folded capuchin and stood confused, not knowing which of the gentlemen was his father.

And Niccolo Polo looked at this son of his standing there, a well-grown, stalwart lad of fifteen, with something of the wide sea's freedom in his clear grey eyes, something of the salt desert's hardihood in his straight bearing, and Niccolo was well pleased. He clapped the lad on the shoulder, kissed him on both cheeks, and presented him to his uncle Maffeo, the while Ser Andrea chuckled and fondled a small pet ape, chained to the head of his litter. But introductions and questions do not breed familiarity in the mind of youth.

"Well, sirrah!" said Niccolo eventually. "Are you glad to have found a father at last?"

Marco looked round at the transformed lady Fiordelisa. She, for him, was still the most interesting being in the room. Father and uncle though they might be, he was not yet acquainted with those strange gentlemen. But she in her sudden beauty was adorable.

"Saving your presence, sir," he answered bluntly, his eyes still upon her, "I would rather have a brother."

Maffeo laughed. Niccolo looked puzzled. Then he too turned his eyes on the lady Fiordelisa and smiled. And Ser Andrea, whose senility was sometimes painfully astute, suddenly broke in.

"Well spoken, the young adventurer! There is still time to give him a brother! Look you, son Niccolo, you have travelled enough, and your lady cousin Trevisan is over ripe for marriage. Get you together, before she is too old to bear you another son!"

CHAPTER XI

The extraordinary, and for Marco the unexpected and outrageous thing, happened. Had he not blurted out the secret desire of his heart, had he welcomed his father better, perhaps it might have been prevented. That was the remorseful idea which was to haunt him.

And yet, how could any one have been prevented from recognising the sudden beauty of Madonna? In an hour, on the return of the travellers, she had bloomed like a late rose, and she and Niccolo Polo looked on each other with eyes of love.

He who had had no thought of any woman for years, now, in the soft air of Venice, knew his need and saw its satisfaction. She who had cherished his memory ever since, long ago, a flower and the warm glance of youth had passed between them, now was a fair maid once more.

And young Marco, who might have found in his father a companion dearer than any brother, as this father proved indeed to be one of the Company of the Free, was suddenly faced with the sense of outraged loss.

He hated Madonna for stealing his father's love. He knew Madonna now for a witch, who, by some magic potion, had transformed herself for this purpose.

When the marriage was hurried forward, he attended the nuptial ceremony in the house, scowling. After the wedding, when Niccolo and Maffeo both took up their residence at the Ca' Polo and when Fiordelisa seemed daily to grow more radiant and lovely, Marco avoided his home as much as possible.

He loathed to see his father perpetually wooing the lady. He detested and despised her new reputation throughout Venice as a beauty and its attendant vanities. And

when, after nearly a year of this horror, he learned one day that the much desired younger brother had been born, Marco felt that the cup of retribution was full.

He went reluctantiy in to see the new bambino. Madonna, whose pale, pointed face and cobalt-coloured robe made her more than ever like one of her Byzantine prototypes, sat in a deep throne-like chair, over which Niccolo, dressed in orange and black, leaned and smiled with an insufferable expression of achievement. Madonna held the infant, who was tightly swaddled in bands, to her open bosom, and Uncle Maffeo, in the posture of an adoring saint, knelt at one side. In the background, wise women and attendants hovered.

"Come, Marco," said Niccolo, "and greet the brother you wanted. He is to be called Maffeo, after my good brother here."

Marco approached and looked down at the small cocoon-like object fastened gluttonously by its lips to Madonna's white breast. It was outrageous. That they should expect him, a man of sixteen, to acknowledge this worm, this dependent thing as his brother! Hot tears filled his eyes.

"Well," said Niccolo. "Is he not to your liking? Have you nothing to say?"

Marco choked. He had meant at least to behave with propriety, to felicitate Madonna and to express his intention to pray for the continued honour, glory and health of herself and bambino. But now the words would not come. He was suddenly possessed of a devil, and this devil spoke with his lips.

"I never wanted a brother like this. I had sooner play with my grandsire's pet ape."

And the heavens did not fall. . . . There was a moment's silence. Then Uncle Maffeo, no longer the adoring saint, but marvellously human, sat back and roared with laughter. And Niccolo, lightly kissed the top of Madonna's head and laughed too. And even Madonna herself smiled.

"Oh, 'tis an honest stripling!" chuckled Maffeo the elder. "First, he would rather have a brother than a

father, and then he would rather have a pet ape than either! Here's truth enough to please the Great Khan. Help me up, young Marco, and let's away and talk business together, for you're a man that will go far."

As so often happens in this wicked world, sin had a great reward. From this time, Uncle Maffeo, who had hitherto seemed too occupied in his own affairs to be aware of Marco's existence, took the lad into his confidence, told him about the great and honourable mission on which he and Niccolo were engaged and, finding that Marco could write a fair and clerkly hand, employed him sometimes as a secretary in drafting letters to various dignitaries.

Niccolo was still aloof, still absorbed, whenever he was at home, in Madonna and bambino, but more often away on visits to influential people, who might lend their aid to the mission or vouchsafe information on the question of the long-delayed Papal election.

And gradually this question became more and more paramount. Its importance eclipsed the importance of Madonna and bambino. Marco rejoiced. His father and Uncle Maffeo were now constantly closeted together, discussing the urgency of their business, chafing at its delay, while he sat and listened absorbed.

They did not consider him. Their conversation centred always round the questions: When will the new Pope be elected? Why is the election so long delayed? What must the Great Khan think had happened? How were they to act?

"It is near five years since we left him," cried Niccolo, "and he trusted us to return!"

"He spoke fairly, like an honourable gentleman," groaned Maffeo, "and his conversion is at stake."

"By all the saints, it is not his faith I am thinking of," said Niccolo. "It is ours. Did we not pledge him our words, and are we not to redeem them?"

At last it came to this, that the solemn promise must be fulfilled, in part if not in whole. As there was no Pope to receive the embassy and to dispatch the one hundred teachers, the Polos must perforce return alone to explain the situation to Kubilai Khan.

"Alone we may be," said Maffeo, "but we need not go empty handed. Did we not swear to bring back some of the oil from the lamp on the Holy Sepulchre, and what is to prevent us going first to Jerusalem to get it?"

Niccolo agreed. "That will at least prove to the Great Khan that we did what we could and, on the way, we can visit His Eminence Teobaldo Visconti, at Acre, ask his advice and obtain his permission."

Suddenly young Marco leapt from his corner, flung himself at his father's feet and held his father's knees.

"Sir, take me with you! Dear sir, I beseech you to allow me to come. Do not leave me behind again. I am a man. I am strong. I will go as your servant. I will be more than a son to you. If you will permit me to carry the holy oil, I will fast and do penance to make me worthy and I will guard it with my life. Sweet father, by the memory of my dead mother, set me free in your company!"

The passionate words poured forth like a torrent. Marco, the silent, taciturn, ungracious youth, stormed like a young bull.

"Why, son! I did not know you were in the room! What is this? You want to travel with us? You were to have continued your training to take over the business at home from your grandsire. Is not that a great enough ambition?"

"Dear sir, nay! I am sick of Venice. Here we are on the edge of the great world, not within its bounds. The world calls me, sir. I desire, I have desired for years, the company of the free. Only in that company can I find a brother. Uncle, speak for me! If I am left behind, I must go my own way. I must seek service on a galley. I have friends among the mariners in the port."

"Hear him," said Niccolo. "What say you, Maffeo?"

"Let him come," said Maffeo, chuckling. "Let him come and look for a brother."

Thus, with the flicker of an eyelid, do gods decide the destiny of young adventurers.

They started for Acre on one of the great merchant

galleys, owned by the trading house of Polo. Before the lateen sails were spread and while the oars dipped in the golden water and flashed and dipped again, Marco waved farewell to the Winged Creatures of the Piazetta. He felt that he was under their direction, that he belonged, at last, to the Company of the Free.

The oarsmen and the crew of the galley were free citizens. From among those of their kind that swarmed on the quays, they had come on board, singing hymns to their Patron Saint Phocas, whose image was carried on the galley and would be exposed for their protection in bad weather. Every night during the voyage, St. Phocas would be invoked by the mariners to join their dinner. And as the good saint never came, every night the worth of his food would be put aside to be given in charity to the poor at the journey's end.

It was Marco's first voyage. They went, touching at Negropont and at various islands, carried by favourable winds across Homer's " wine-dark sea "—new Argonauts, deserving another epic.

Not like those ancients, seeking only their own gain, not even like so many of the Crusaders, who had taken that way since to profit by rather than to serve the Cross. But like honourable gentlemen they went, daring all to keep a promise.

And Marco felt that, even if they could take no message from the Pope, Christ would approve this independent venture of theirs as well as though it were authorised by His Vicar.

In the Byzantine mosaics of the great church of San Marco, the Saviour of Mankind is figured, as in the earliest Christian sculptures, with a primitive apprehension of physical beauty, but with an instinct for the Divine ideal, that shows Him adult and beardless. This portrayal was, of course, familiar to Marco and, in the secret places of his heart, he did not love the figure of these strange pictures so much as he loved and yearned after the Christ of human life, revealed in the Scriptures.

The Son of Man, with His noble indignation against

all hypocrisy and His perfect sense of fellowship, was some one dear and clear and, to the mind of a boy, not so remote as the artists of the period showed.

The lovely kindness of the Wedding Guest, Who turned water into wine that a village feast might not fail; the glorious power of the Friend, Who raised dead Lazarus and said to the maiden "Arise!" and restored the only son of his mother; the surpassing wit of the Teacher, Who defeated scribes and pharisees in every argument; these and others were the incidents of the Divine Incarnation that Marco adored.

And when he thought of the Sacrifice of that Guest, that Friend, that Teacher, he wept, with a wild indignation against all sin, but without as yet appreciating the victorious triumph of Love.

The city of Acre, with its great fortress and its crowds of soldiers, merchants and artisans, was for him a wonder and a delight.

The visit to the Legate, Teobaldo Visconti, was impressive, but, on the whole, disappointing, for that eminent Churchman seemed rather to have forgotten the Polos during the lapse of two years. When he heard their story anew, the point that evidently interested him was, not their eagerness to fulfil their mission, but their anxiety, which he shared, to learn when the Papal election would be concluded.

Never, he said, had there been such an interregnum; never had the cardinals at Viterbo so long delayed and so much disagreed, though it had been suggested that the roof should be taken off the palace to allow the wind of Heaven to inspire them more freely.

And Teobaldo's air was harassed, and he seemed to have lost that sense of happy certainty he had once possessed.

When Niccolo and Maffeo asked for permission to go to Jerusalem and get some oil from the Holy Sepulchre to take to the Great Khan, he accorded the permission hastily, as though almost too willing for them to depart.

So they travelled straightway with a caravan of pilgrims to the Holy City.

Here, on the ground that Blessed Feet had trod, Marco felt nearer to his Lord than he had ever felt in any church of Venice.

But when they went to the Sepulchre and saw the five great oil lamps that burned there continually night and day, it seemed to Marco that the Angel, whose countenance was like lightning and his raiment white as snow, whispered in his heart those words once uttered to the questing women, " He is not here ! "

From one of the lamps, they took " a blessing " (some of the oil as a beneficent memorial) and replaced it with new. And then they prayed and Marco, having told his beads, added a special and unorthodox supplication:

" Dearest Lord, be with us on our journey ! "

Then they returned to Acre, for the Legate had said that news of the Papal election might arrive at any moment, and it was not only urgent for them to hear the news, but they had more to ask of him.

But Teobaldo Visconti had still no news and was more worried than ever.

" We desire, Eminence, to return to the Great Khan," said Niccolo, " for we have already tarried long, and there has been more than enough delay."

" Since 'tis your wish to go back," answered the Legate, with ill concealed relief, " I am well content."

" But, sir," persisted Niccolo, " is there to be no message from Christendom in reply to the Great Khan's appeal ? "

" Certainly," said Teobaldo, in a flutter. " You can assure him of our interest. I will cause letters to be written for delivery to him. These letters will bear testimony that you have done your utmost to accomplish his charge, but as there is no Pope, you have been unable to do so."

There was further delay while they waited for the letters. Apparently their embassy was considered of small importance ; the fact that Kubilai Khan invited Christian conversion and tuition for the greater part of Asia did not weigh beside other pressing business on the spot.

The Polos chafed and wondered, but they could do

nothing. Their story aroused no excitement at Acre; their travellers' tales were barely believed. At last, however, they received the documents and were free to embark for that famous port of Ayas, which was now to be their starting point, as before it had been their journey's end.

Soon after their arrival in Lesser Armenia, where Marco was to learn that the just and Christian King, Hayton I, was under Tartar dominion, the news they had so long desired followed and caught them.

At long last, a Pope had been chosen, and he was no less a personage than the harassed Legate, Teobaldo Visconti!

What a surprise for them, and since he already knew of their enterprise, what good fortune! Would he now realise his great responsibility? Would he now recall them?

He did. Teobaldo, or Pope Gregory X, as he was to be named, did not forget that the letters the Polos were bearing to Kubilai Khan bore his signature and seal.

When a message desiring the embassy, on the part of the Apostolic See, not to proceed farther but to return at once to Acre reached the Polos, they rejoiced exceedingly. They made known their urgent business to the King of Armenia, and enlisted the interest of that Christian monarch so far that, on his orders, a galley was prepared forthwith to take them back from Ayas.

At last they would be able thoroughly to fulfil their mission. At last the Pope would send with them to the court of the Great Khan those one hundred divines and scholars, expert in revealing the blessings of western civilisation, for which Kubilai had asked.

Once more at Acre, they were received in audience by the head of Christendom. They paid their respects with humble reverence and received his blessing.

Success had enfolded Gregory X in a holy calm. He was no longer the harassed Legate, but a Pontiff of weighty character, who would some day be enrolled by one section

of the Church among the saints, though Rome never accorded canonisation.

"We have considered it our first duty to attend to your business," he told the Polos. "We have never forgotten the importance of this matter. And now the Tartar Khan who sent you may well be satisfied. We have appointed the most learned Churchmen to be found in this country to accompany you and to do whatever may be required."

They thanked him earnestly. They saw themselves leading the one hundred into the promised land, with hymns of praise.

"Their names," proceeded the Pope, "are Friar William of Tripoli and Friar Nicholas of Vicenza, and they are both of the Dominican Order of Preachers."

"These two will then head the rest, Your Holiness?"

"The rest?"

"One hundred are expected, Father."

"Two are sufficient. More have never gone on such a mission. Did not Friar John of Piane de Carpine and Friar William of Rubruck go with one companion each? And who is this Kubilai Khan that he should expect more than other Tartars?"

"Father, we gave him our promise."

Gregory X smiled benignly. "You have done your duty like good children. You must bow now to paternal authority and wisdom. Exaggeration and extravagance are to be expected from barbarians. We live by the spirit, not by the letter of the law. The two friars we have appointed will teach the Khan all he should know. Moreover, they will carry credentials and letters and rich presents from ourselves, and we have given them authority to ordain priests and to bestow absolution. Therefore, look you, they will have the power of many times their number."

The argument was unanswerable, and the Polos submitted to it with a good grace. They were then presented to the learned friars and, when all had received the final benediction of the Pope, the party of five set forth once more for Ayas.

But in that party there was one at least who was not satisfied, who dared to think that the Latin authorship for which Friar William of Tripoli was renowned and the pious zeal that marked Friar Nicholas of Vicenza were qualifications insufficient for an enterprise of such magnitude.

"I do not understand," reflected young Marco, unhappily. "A promise is a promise. How can two equal one hundred? Surely the Great Khan will be disappointed."

During the sea journey to Ayas both the poor friars were most woefully sick. They had never before penetrated the Levant farther than Syria and, by the time they landed, both were convinced that they were going to their death.

Friar William of Tripoli did not seek a martyr's crown, for it had been foretold to him that his most beneficent influence was to be exerted through literature. Friar Nicholas of Vicenza remembered suddenly that the Tartars had always shown themselves impervious to the zeal of the Church, and considered that this effort would be merely waste of time.

At the present juncture, the Mameluke Sultan, Beibars of Egypt, already mentioned as having plotted with Barka Khan against Hulagu, invaded Armenia with a large army.

Beibars was a horrid infidel. It was said that he was a monster of cruelty (though Friar William allowed that he was sober, chaste, just and even kind to his own Christian subjects), and that his devilish activity was shown, not only in the field of war, but in the fact that he played tennis at Damascus and at Cairo by turns. However that may be, his ravaging troops did constitute a serious menace to the safety of any travellers in this Mongol territory.

Niccolo and Maffeo consulted gravely together as to whether they should take the risk, and decided, almost at once, that it was impossible again to turn back.

And when Marco heard this decision he felt more love for his father and his uncle than he had ever felt before, and gloried in his own young manhood.

But the two friars were not made of such stern stuff. They were in complete agreement with each other, that

they had already endured enough. They were determined not to die for the sake of any Tartar or for any hare-brained mission.

"In that case," said Niccolo to them coldly, "pray do us the favour of handing over to our hands all the credentials, letters and presents that you received from His Holiness."

It was done. The friars took their leave, wringing their hands and prophesying disaster to the wild adventurers.

And while they, the accredited emissaries of Christendom, sought their own safety, in the company of the powerful Master of the Knights Templars, three Venetian gentlemen, as the ambassadors of Kubilai Khan, went on to keep their word.

CHAPTER XII

They joined a well equipped caravan bound for Baghdad and, to avoid the predatory troops of Sultan Beibars, did not follow the direct route by Aleppo and the Euphrates, but went instead north-eastward through Turcomania and Greater Armenia. At the city of Erzinjan, then the see of an Archbishop, they stopped to refresh themselves with baths from hot water springs and to buy travelling clothes, like those worn by the Tartars, of strong quilted black cotton. Then they went on through Erzrum and past the foot of snow-capped Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark once rested, and where they believed it still remained.

This, for Marco, was the threshold of adventure. From here he visualised hitherto unimagined vistas of enchantment. Their dark-skinned travelling companions, hardened wanderers, close to Nature, though acquainted with cities, belonged indeed to the Company of the Free. Their animals, hardened too by many journeys, were friends, bound to them by mutual dependence.

Only in such a relation is the camel a beast capable of inspiring affection. Marco loved his camel, despite her smell and despite her rude manners. Out of his father's hearing he called her Fiordelisa, partly in revenge and partly in tender remembrance of his own childhood.

When he discovered that she suffered from mange, he was much relieved that another caravan, which joined them hereabouts, brought oil from the Baku oilfields of the country of Georgia, lying to the north, for the oil was efficacious in curing her.

The handsome Georgian merchants, travelling in this new caravan, had many tales of their own land for young

and eager ears. Its Christian King was called David and, in the old time, he had always been born marked with the sacred sign of an eagle or of a cross, on the right shoulder. And in times still older, Alexander had caused to be built a Great Wall and an Iron Gate, between the Caspian Sea and the mountains of the Caucasus. This wall still ran from the Castle of Derbend over the ridges of the mountains ; its purpose to shut out the impure race of Gog and Magog, who were Tartars descended from the Ten Tribes of Israel that abandoned the Law of Moses and worshipped the Golden Calf.

Then Niccolo and Maffeo had long discussion with the Georgians, as to whether this Great Wall and this Iron Gate were the only ones of their kind in the world.

But the Georgians said they had heard tell of another Great Wall in the Far Levant, the purpose of which no one knew, and of more than one other Iron Gate.

They followed the line of the Tigris and passed through Mosul, where many heretical Christians congregated under Mongol rule, and where silks, woven with gold threads, fine enough to please any lady, and called mosolin, were to be bought. Beyond this place, wolf-like Kurdish tribes lurked in the hills. Would they attack and would there be a great fight ?

Alas, no ! But Marco's disappointment was forgotten when they reached the wonderful city of Baghdad.

Here they stayed for a little time, and heard how the Khalif had been put to death by Hulagu, the brother of the Great Khan. Here they wandered through the bazaars and saw all the peoples and surely all the riches of the world. Here also Marco listened to many new and wonderful stories.

One of them told of a saintly Christian man, who had dwelt not so long ago in Baghdad, and he was a one-eyed cobbler. He had faith greater than a grain of mustard seed and had proved its power to the infidels by causing a mountain to be removed. Whereby all the Christians in the place had rejoiced and the Khalif had been secretly converted !

But here Marco had to part, at a good price, with his camel Fiordelisa. For Niccolo and Maffeo decided that, rather than risk returning by the hard route they had already travelled from China, it might be better to continue by the Persian Gulf to Hormuz, a famous port of the Indian Ocean, and so proceed by sea.

"We Venetians are born mariners," said Maffeo, "and the Arab merchants say that this way is better than any other."

"We will try it," said Niccolo, "though I mistrust the Arabs. I wish we could have found again the good company in which we travelled first from Bokhara through Otrar."

So on they went to Basra, famous for its date groves, with another Arab caravan engaged in exporting horses and asses. And Marco, with the fickleness of youth, transferred his affection to a charming little white mare, whose foal ran at her side.

They were now on the borders of Persia, and he heard how from that country had originally come the Magi, those three Wise Men of old, who had travelled to visit the Holy Child, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

They had gone in to the Child one by one, and the Child had appeared to each venerable Wise Man as of his own age, but to the three together as indeed an infant. And, in exchange for their gifts, the Child had given them a stone. But they had thrown the stone away into a well. Then a high flame had risen straightway from that well, and the Magi had fallen down and adored it.

"Wherefore," said the grave Arab horse dealer, "the people of Persia worship fire as the emblem of Truth to this day."

Marco thought regretfully of Madonna and bambino at home in Venice, and he patted the arched neck of the little white mare and whispered in her ear, "I will call you Fiordelisa too, for you are more like her than ever was my camel."

The Arabs were taking her and their other animals to

the island city of Kish, in the Persian Gulf, one of the chief ports of their trade to India. The place had apparently been named after its founder, Kaias, who, the son of a poor widow, had in the tenth century made a great fortune, not through any horses, but through the intelligent help of a cat.

"I never thought much of cats before," said Marco. "But it may well be true. For cats are said to have many lives, and surely none but they could help their masters in a climate like this."

He felt the heat in the cramped quarters on board the ship in which they had embarked, horribly, as did the horses. And after the horses and their owners had landed at Kish, he fell ill while the ship proceeded to Hormuz.

The great port then stood on the mainland, but was soon after to be devastated by the Mongols and transferred to an adjacent island. Now, vessels reached the city by a creek from the gulf and, if the heat at sea had been insufferable, the temperature on land was like the mouth of hell. Ships loaded with spices, precious stones and ivory crowded the harbour and Indian merchants thronged the palm-bordered quay.

Marco, burning with fever and shivering with ague, was carried on shore, and found that a diet of salt fish and date wine did little to relieve his distress.

"We must leave this place as speedily as may be," said Niccolo, "or the lad will die."

But when they came to inquire about ocean-faring ships they found that all these were built of wooden planks, stitched together with coconut fibre and rubbed with whale oil, having no iron in their composition and appearing, to Venetian eyes, the most unseaworthy craft imaginable.

"Better," said Maffeo, "the evils we know by land than such a venture."

"I might welcome the evils I know," said Niccolo, "but it is said that, in the desert north of Hormuz, there are evils that none can know and survive; scorching winds, laden with so deadly a posion that the bodies of

people caught in them are not only roasted, but rot and fall to pieces."

"It is a poor choice," said Maffeo, "whether to go in a ship that will certainly fall to pieces in the first storm, or take a caravan, whereby there is still a chance of preserving our bodies uncooked and whole."

Eventually, more cautious, like all experts, of dangers they knew than of risks they did not know, they decided on the land route, northward via Kerman.

Marco, almost past caring where they went, was hoisted on to a kneeling camel. But, as the beast lurched to its feet and swung away, he prayed with a full heart:

"Lord Christ, I believe like the one-eyed cobbler of Baghdad. I adore Thy Truth like the Wise Men of old . . . Dearest Lord, be with us to the end of our journey."

First there was nothing but scorching desert. But they did not encounter the terrible wind, and presently came into a fine plain, well watered and fruitful.

That Marco would have found bearable, had not his father and uncle persistently pressed on him the bitter tasting bread that the country produced.

Then they climbed the rough and steep road of a mountain pass, where again brigands lurked, and this time he was glad they did not attack, for how can a sick man show his mettle?

For about twenty miles they traversed this pass to another plain, where partridges and tropical fruits abounded, where white humped oxen were used for freight and fat-tailed sheep were herded in flocks round towns and villages, walled and armed against bandits.

"We are lucky to escape the freebooters," said Niccolo, "for it seems they are in truth demons, who make a magical darkness cover the land, when they conduct their forays."

They were not thus caught in a dust storm, and on this second plain Marco somewhat revived.

Else he could hardly have survived their next traverse of another great mountain pass, where they went from

tropical conditions to extreme and bitter cold. This led them into yet another plain and, when they had crossed that, they were in the province of Kerman, famed for its falcons, its turquoise mines and its manufacture of exquisitely fine steel weapons.

They rested in the capital, which was a see of the Nestorian Church, before starting again across a great salt desert to reach the next stopping place for caravans, a large town called Kuhbenan. For the first three days of a week across this desert they carried their own water. Then, just as their supply was running short, they found with joy an unexpected conduit.

After Kuhbenan they went on for another eight days, carrying all food and water to a place called Tebbes, and then their aim was the city of Damaghan.

Here, standing alone in the plain with no other tree visible, they saw the Speaking Tree of the Sun that prophesied the death of Alexander; that unique tree which might also be the Arbre Sec, unable to bear leaves till the Holy Sepulchre was redeemed; actually the venerable Chinar tree that survives the desiccation of the desert.

Here at Damaghan the climate was at last temperate, and here—oh, strange to a man who had almost forgotten comfort—were kind and beautiful women!

How soft and lingering were the glances of one who handed wine cups in a tavern!

And how sweetly another sang at night from behind a lattice.

> "Hark! how the bulbul woos the garden rose,
> And if she ever yields to him who knows?
> Her lips are cold, but here are other lips,
> More warm, more red, more ripe for love than those."

They could not stop, though young blood is hot blood, and some memories last for many years. . . .

They went on by Nishapur and Meshed, through fine plains and lush valleys bordered with orchards; through a tract of desert to Shibigan, where melons are dried and preserved as sweetmeats, and beyond to Balkh, the Mother

of Cities, where Alexander married the daughter of Darius, and where Chingiz, the grandfather of the Great Khan, had left nothing but a ruin.

And here, at this time, was the end of Persia, but not by any means the end of surely the greatest journey that men have ever made.

Did they achieve this journey merely by surpassing good luck? In many particulars fortune did favour them. But they were protected by no miracle. They suffered every hardship and difficulty that other travellers might have known and proved their own superiority.

With equipment that modern explorers would call so insufficient as to be impossible, no instruments, no maps, no medicines, no ice and no portable fuel, they adapted themselves to the customs of the countries through which they passed and identified themselves with the various peoples they encountered.

Free citizens of the little republic of Venice, they became citizens of the world, when to be cosmopolitan was to know no farther than the coast of Syria. They went, not for themselves but for the cause of humanity, and that cause flavoured all their intercourse with strangers, supplied them and protected them, and was a light to lighten their way. They appreciated the right relationship of man to his fellows, and their success was due to the control of the uniting Word.

Beyond Balkh there was devastated country, infested with brigands and wild beasts. This was the land which had been most ravaged by the Mongols under Chingiz Khan. Ruins of buildings and of aqueducts fringed the dreary road that ran north-eastward and prowling lions roared in the night time.

For one hundred and seventy miles they went on, till they came to the city of Talikan, in the province of Kunduz. Here was a great corn market, where they renewed their supply of food. And when presently they continued through the north-eastern country, they came among vineyards and Mohammedan hillmen, who were excellent

huntsmen but inveterate drunkards, and were to be remembered by Marco as "an evil and murderous generation."

At Kishm, the next place they reached, the people lived in mountain caves and chased fierce porcupines with dogs. But, for the following three days, they found no human habitation, and carried with them all food and water.

Then they came into the splendid province of Badakshan, whose rulers traced their descent from Alexander, and whose mountains were rich in rubies, silver and azure. Fine horses, said to be of the breed of Bucephalus, were bred in this cold climate. The land was green with young crops of wheat, linseed and sesame. White hawks flew above the pastures where wild sheep grazed. And on the grassy plateaux of lofty hills, streams, where speckled trout could be caught, flowed between banks where daffodils and crocuses bloomed. Towns and villages nestled amid these lovely uplands and, at one of them, the Polos stayed for a time to benefit by the keen and glorious air.

Who so happy then as Marco? He had revived before, but now he regained full strength. There was sport with the villagers, who were great archers. There were endless interests.

With the ladies he left father and uncle, who were more attracted than he by those large-hipped beauties of the town, arrayed for local fascination in trousers voluminous as widely spreading skirts. Older men might weakly succumb to such charms, but what had he to do with women?

There were other temptations which beguiled him more—the temptation to linger indefinitely in this delightful place; the temptation to turn aside from a goal that must still be difficult to reach; even the temptation to consider that there were remarkable points in the faith professed by idolaters.

For, with regard to the two last enticements, Marco now heard many wonderful stories of other territories not far distant in the south, and met for the first time from those territories devout disciples of northern Buddhism.

The lands of Udyana and Kashmir were famous then

as centres of that religion. Their holy men were noted as great magicians and, though some of the wanderers he met were "a pestilent people and crafty," the Eremites or Fakirs were certainly possessed of great knowledge.

But presently he heard that, to reach those holy lands of Buddhism, the greatest travellers of all time, the pilgrims from the Chinese Empire, whither he was bound, had for ages traversed the wild and inaccessible plateaux, midway between heaven and earth, that lay to the north-east of Badakshan.

Over the Roof of the World, in their south-western journey, had those intrepid travellers come, undeterred by "dragons that blew forth poisonous winds," supported by their faith.

"What idolaters have done, we also can do," said Marco proudly, and his desire to go on became keener than any desire to stay.

But when he reported what he had heard to father and uncle, they smiled gravely, and said, "Ay, the way is difficult! We know, for we have travelled it already in our return from the court of the Great Khan."

They were indeed the equals of any pilgrims. They too had met and overcome dragons, and would face again, for the sake of a promise, those eternal and formidable forces of the wild.

They anointed their bodies with oil and, over their now ragged coats of quilted cotton, they drew long robes of sheepskin with the wool on the inner side. On their heads they wore helmets of black lambskin, capacious enough almost to cover their bearded faces.

With ponies as baggage animals, they followed the upper stream of the Oxus river for twelve days, and so came into the valley district of Wakhan. Then, always proceeding north-eastward against icy winds, they climbed up to the Pamirs, that high and desolate region, that yet has been and must again be important in the political history and geography of the world.

From the earliest times it has been considered as a

route ; it has constantly been the subject of serious correspondence between the British and Russian Governments, both of the Aryan race which here started its original migration ; in the future who can say what problem it may constitute ?

The Pamirs consist of a series of lofty steppes and narrow valleys between ranges of hills. In these valleys snowdrifts lie and the bitter winds never cease. No crops can live in the frozen soil, but there are lakes on the surface, the waters of which are perpetually tossed into murmuring waves.

Near one of the largest of these lakes, the Polos found rich pasturage for their lean ponies. But the splash of its waters, the blasts of the wind and the howling of wolves were the only sounds in that dreary waste.

The country was uninhabited, for though a tribe of Mongols used it as a summer camping ground, the Polos had stayed too long in Badakshan and the season was now late.

They saw no birds, but there were wild animals, almost tame in those solitudes. The most remarkable of these was a great long-horned sheep, to which the Polos little guessed that their own name (Ovis Poli) would eventually be given. From its horns, discarded by Mongol hunters, they cut new shoes for their ponies and eating bowls for themselves.

The fearful cold and the rarity of the air at that altitude were their chief trials. It was difficult to make their dung fires burn at all, and still harder to cook the food they carried.

But they were fortified by a power that made all human needs insignificant. Their muscles were like iron and their nerves were like tempered steel. They had developed the hardihood of animals and their hearts were hot with their purpose.

Here in the vast unpeopled steppes, here on the Roof of the World, beneath the tremendous arch of the pale and infinite sky, they were close to the Mightiest.

From the Central Pamirs, which they traversed in

twelve days, they went down the Aksu river and, crossing its watershed due eastward, struck a route that led them past Muztagh-Ata and so on towards the Gez defile.

In that narrow valley there was scarcely any grazing for their animals, and its appearance was even more desolate than the high region they had left behind. For more than a month they struggled on through this wilderness, carrying all their supplies and getting no assistance from the wild tribesmen of the hills.

But at last they reached the city of Kashgar, which then lay like a haven at the end of the route they had taken in preference to the more direct but impassable route to Yarkand. Kashgar was a fine town, a metropolitan see of the Nestorian Church, and famed for the picturesque colour of its red houses, surrounded with vineyards and cotton fields. The fair place seemed to the Polos like " port after stormy seas," but, like a seaport indeed, its mixed population, mostly of the Nestorian faith, proved to be wholly unpleasant.

" A wretched niggardly set of people," decided Marco, when they found little hospitality among these native Christians.

So on they went to the province of Yarkand and the town of that name, which was built in a small oasis of the desert. But again they did not linger here, for the water supply, kept in large open basins, was used indifferently for drinking, washing and draining and, further, had the property of causing goitre.

Next they found themselves in the province of Khotan, a district as rich in the fruits of the earth and in its industries as it was then and still remains rich in historical interest.

For, in this part of Chinese Turkestan, the plains that produce cotton, wine and all sorts of grain, and the towns where fine carpets and felts are made and jade from the river beds is sold, are fringed with barren desert, the sand and stone of which covers the lost civilisations of immemorial ages. To discover the buried treasures and the dead language of those remote times, archæologists are still working. And, as they work and reveal what they

find of a supreme culture in Buddhist Aryan relics, time seems to cease and this journey of the Polos seems to belong to yesterday.

From Khotan, which was under the dominion of Kubilai Khan, the Great South Road, one of the main traffic arteries of the world, originally started to communicate with the old kingdom of Tangut and with the Chinese Empire. At this time it diverged northward across the basin of the Tarim, to avoid the Kalmuk bandits, who infested the direct route. But, as the older and more direct route would save time, the Polos decided to take it with all its risks.

It led them through the province of Pein, which is the modern oasis district of Keriya.

From here, irrigation is now carried into the desert at the base of the south-eastern mountains, to reclaim and cultivate a land that flourished long ago, before its cities were overwhelmed with sand. And in the river, Keriya, jade of many varieties—white, green, yellow, vermilion and jet black—is still found and carried thence to China.

Marco wanted to see a great desert marsh that lies on the west of the oasis.

"They say it is the site of an ancient battle," he told his father, "and the fact is proved in that there is no verdure, but the ground is wholly the colour of dried blood."

"Nonsense," answered Niccolo. "I have been there, and the colour is due to a small plant, the name of which no one knows."

"Then perchance that plant springs from the bones of long dead warriors," said Marco.

"Our concern is for the future, not the past," retorted Niccolo.

And his words were soon oddly justified. For the people of this province were famous for their good looks, if not for their morals, and so hospitably inclined that, with a view to speeding travellers on the further desert journey, in a certain village they offered each of the Polos a wife.

" The young one is especially comely and must surely be ready for marriage ? "

Marco blushed and shook his head, while Niccolo and Maffeo equally declined an honour which would necessitate responsibility. But they were quickly informed that there need be no question of encumbrance.

Any member of a caravan passing here could contract a legal marriage, which would automatically expire after twenty days and, in this obliging community, the women were continually free to marry again.

The Polos hastened on for one hundred and fifty miles, passing frequent pools of salt water and continual ruins in the sands, till they reached Charchan, a small town in the plain, overshadowed by mountains.

Then, for seven days, they proceeded through sand and briny marshland to the district of Lobnor, where the position of oases, watered by large and small lakes, is perpetually varied by the process of desiccation.

The place at which they stopped to rest and obtain one month's supplies for man and beast, to last while they crossed the terrible desert of Lop to Tangut on the south-eastern side, was then a large town called Lop and is now a village called Charkalyk.

Many were the warnings they received before they set forth again. This desert (the south-western tract of the Gobi) was, they heard, haunted by evil spirits, and if they strayed from the direct route, tempted by demon voices, they would certainly be lost.

So great was the whole extent of Gobi that it would take a year to ride from one end to the other. The longest but easiest route, as the elder Polos already knew, lay northward by Hamil ; the route they now proposed to take was much shorter but infinitely more dangerous.

For the first time, Marco's heart quailed at the thought of this final ordeal. He could bear any natural danger. What he dreaded now was the thought that they were about to be beset by veritable powers of darkness, which must inevitably seek to prevent the fulfilment of their mission. No human enemy in the shape of lurking

brigands, no roasting or icy winds out of heaven, no snow or sand or foul water or scarce food could stop them. But the unutterable malignancy of a Power without faith was stronger than they and might yet cause them to break their promise.

And just before they started, Marco prayed again, but with a faint heart, " Lord Christ, be with us to the end of our journey."

They took Chinese guides and fresh two-humped camels, and they started forth across those dreary hills and vales of sand. There was no trace of a road, but the bleaching bones of men and animals occasionally marked their route.

It was indeed a region of death and of despair. The frightful melancholy of its aspect was due to no natural cause. There was fresh water to be found at fairly frequent intervals. There were tamarisk bushes to relieve the monotony of the scene. But the sun, that shone by day, was pale with the dust haze raised by the ceaseless wind, and the moon, that shone by night, was livid like a spectral thing. And the vast waste was filled with unearthly sounds, sighing and moaning and muttering—as though itself were a soul bound in torment. And Fear rose beside the Polos through the desert of Lop.

If young Marco could have known what it was he feared, he could have met and overcome it. There were times when he mistook the form of a tamarisk bush, solid with crusted salt, for a crouching monster, and he would shout to warn the others, and approach it, and join in the laughter against himself. But when he had passed it, he dared not look back, lest it should have changed and moved.

And when the Chinese guides told him that the noises were due to shifting sands or cracking ice in the adjacent mountains, he accepted the explanation, but could not apply it to the sounds of beating drums, and tramping feet, and talking voices, to which he listened at night in a cold sweat.

Moreover, it was clear that the camel men themselves were not convinced by their own normal assurances. For they said perpetually that he must never seek to follow those sounds, nor lag behind, nor stray from their company.

And their care, in this respect, was extended to the beasts, at whose necks bells were hung, so that they might more easily be traced if they wandered. Evidently, even animals with their natural sense, knew the irresistible temptation to track the noises and discover their source.

The desire was for Marco a perpetual agony. He knew there was nothing to be found, and could not rest from the urgent need to find it. He saw his actual companions, as in a dream, and felt that only just out of sight another company rode—a company of ghosts, to which he belonged. He heard his actual companions speaking, as at a remote distance and the voices and the drums that called him were nightly nearer and more insistent.

After nearly a month it was like a madness, where he could not tell the difference between real and false, where faith wavered and reason fled.

At last, one night, he woke from sleep on the bare ground, in sudden and full possession of all his faculties.

Never before had he beheld the full moon so clear and bright. Never before had he so noticed the pungent smell of the recumbent camels, nor heard so clearly their grunts, the chewing motion of their mouths, and the snores of father and uncle lying within the shelter of their one small tent.

Marco felt more refreshed, alert and sane than he had felt for weeks. He knew that they were near the end of the desert of Lop. It could not now be long before they came to the country of Tangut, which, recovered from wars by which it had once been ravaged, would offer them all the comforts of civilisation, and where his father had said that the Mongol outposts of Kubilai's empire would undoubtedly give them safe conduct to the still distant court of Shang Tu. Their mission was nearly accomplished. He could already fancy their journey's end.

Then, as he lay wide awake and happily thinking on these things, the unknown, the unknowable horror was upon him.

It came with the sound of music, near, clear, inexpressibly plaintive and beguiling. On some reed instrument that no human hands had made, the music was surely played by no human lips. The music called Marco to come and find it with the voice of a child. And Marco suffered so poignantly that he knew, if he resisted the voice, he would die.

Then he rose up swiftly and silently and left their encampment and followed the music.

It had seemed to be a little way above him, behind a rolling hill of sand. But, as he topped this hill, he saw by the white light of the moon, that the vale beyond was empty. . . .

The music sounded now with an urgent note, interspersed with the drone of a kettledrum, from rising ground on the north-west.

He ran towards it crying, " Wait for me. Oh, wait ! "

But to whom it was he cried he did not know.

His face and hands were wet and, as he ran, his limbs shook so that he stumbled, and there was a sense of sick emptiness in his stomach. He gained the rising ground and there was nothing, though he was ready to see an army terrible with banners. . . .

And the music, shrill now and piercing, came from a fold of land farther to the north.

He ran again, and so proceeded for perhaps an hour, in great anguish.

Then he fell to the ground and, knowing himself lost, heard the music change to the rippling sound of malicious laughter.

This he believed to be the end, but the little strength left to him was roused by that mocking sound, and he breathed a final appeal, " Lord, have mercy upon me ! "

The laughter was hushed and still. And instantly, a Voice close beside him spoke, saying, " Fear not, little brother ! "

He looked up and saw One standing near in the moonlight. And lo! though Marco had never seen that face before, he knew and loved it well. The Leader of the Company of the Free, the Captain of all Winged Creatures, had come to him and called him brother.

He was beautiful as sunshine on the waves of the sea, and He was wise as the mountains which abide from one generation to another, and He was compassionate as men are not compassionate. Yet to Him belonged all the virtue that men have ever shown: their strength and their gentleness, their independence and their fellowship, their courage and their love. He was the Friend of the lonely, the Companion of travellers, and the Brother for whom Marco had longed. And by no possibility could He ever misunderstand or be deceived by the heart of man, for in Him was all Knowledge and all Truth.

Then Marco was aware of perfect peace and security and, in that Presence he adored, without word or thought, but in utter contentment.

And, after a time, the night passed, and it was early dawn.

And one of the camel men from the Polos' caravan came and found him lying there, and roused him, saying, "Why did you leave the camp, even for a little way? It was foolishness."

Marco saw that he was at a short distance only from the small tent and the baggage animals and knew that, unconsciously, he must have run in a wide circle.

He said to the Chinese, whose fear of evil spirits had been evident, "Why did you come and find me? Was there not danger for you too?"

The camel man, a rough fellow, answered cheerfully—"Man must do what he can for a fellow creature."

There was no more said, and they went on to the journey's end.

CHAPTER XIII

NINE years had passed, since Niccolo and Maffeo Polo had parted from Kubilai Khan. During that time and the preceeding six years of Kubilai's reign, many important events had happened in the Far East.

First, having laid the foundations of his rule in the hearts of his people, he proved his charity genuine in extending it to the most disloyal member of his family, his brother Arikbuga.

After Arikbuga had sent his false message of submission, he had continued rebellion without success, and finally, deserted by every ally and reduced to misery, he appealed to the mercy of Kubilai, whom he had systematically wronged.

The Great Khan was then in one of his summer camps for sport.

Arikbuga entered the Imperial tent and prostrated himself. There was silence. The wretched man could not be further abased. Gone was all his vanity, quenched was all his malice. He had scarcely any retinue, and his clothing was in rags. At last, rising, he moved, still in that dreadful silence, and stood in the most inconspicuous part of the pavilion, the place reserved for secretaries.

He, a prince of the royal blood, grandson of Chingiz and brother of the ruling Khan, knew himself no better than a Chinese or Persian employee. And tears of bitter shame filled his eyes, so that he did not see that the eyes of Kubilai were also wet.

An officer suddenly stood before Arikbuga.

"The Khan desires to forget the past," he said, in a low voice. "He instructs me to tell you that you must

feel happy." Then, to confirm his words, he turned towards Kubilai and said aloud: "O Khan, the prince Arikbuga is standing! What place do you wish him to occupy?"

"The place of honour among mine own sons," answered Kubilai and, advancing, he took Arikbuga by the hand and gave him heart-whole welcome and pardon.

One month after this reconciliation, Death summoned Arikbuga's soul before a higher Judge.

But the end of Arikbuga was not the end of family friction. Another enemy, more powerful and pretentious, namely, his cousin Kaidu, came now to the fore and, like a thorn long buried in Kubilai's flesh, was to set up inflammation that endured throughout Kubilai's long reign.

Kaidu was the son of Ogotai's second son, Kashin, who had been exiled after the plot against Mangu Khan, when Kubilai had shown such good fellowship to young Shiramum.

Kashin had gone off vowing vengeance, and his son Kaidu had gradually established authority over Turkestan and part of Transoxiana, through the support of Barka Khan of Kipchak and Borak Khan of the Empire of Jagatai.

On Kubilai's accession, therefore, Kaidu refused to acknowledge him and, throughout his own enormous territory, he and not Kubilai was regarded as the Great Khan. Persia, under the successors of Hulagu, remained loyal to Kubilai, but though a desert of forty days' extent divided his eastern empire from that of Kaidu, the troops posted to protect the lines of their respective frontiers were constantly in conflict, and any journey across Asia, to or from Kubilai's court, must therefore have been hazardous.

At the beginning of Kaidu's long enmity, Kubilai was too occupied in the Far East to take his cousin very seriously.

Korea, under a new king, had attempted revolt against the Mongol yoke, but had been won by a conciliatory policy. Japan was then invited to submit, but Kubilai's envoys were warned by the Koreans not to proceed with

any mission to those crafty islanders. And above all, the Sung Emperor, who knew nothing of the treaty made by General Kia-se-tao, the man of letters, had not yet fulfilled the terms of his vassalage.

The southern dominion of the Sung was known as Manzi, from the fact that the northern Kin dynasty, in the time of its suzerainty, had identified all peoples south of the Yangtse river with the aboriginal tribes, and had called them, in contempt, Man-tzu—Sons of Barbarians. The highly civilised southerners had retorted with the epithet Pei-tai—Fools of the North.

In comparison with the splendour of the Sung, that of the Kin had been a petty imitation and that of the Mongol court was mere pretension. Though the Sung had always been vassals of the northern rulers, they had ruled Manzi since the tenth century A.D.; they were of native origin as opposed to the Manchurian stock of the Kin, and their civilisation was purely Chinese.

The empire of Manzi, south of the Yangtse river, comprised the most lovely provinces of modern China. To name but a few, it included fertile An-hwei with its rice fields; glorious Che-kiang, with its wooded hills, its rich valleys, and its crowded waterways that carry its produce of silk, tea, wine, cotton and bamboo; part of Hu-peh, with its broad plain and the amazing gorges of the Yangtse, and Fu-kien, with its interior mountains and its irregular coastline dotted with islands.

The country to the north and west of Manzi was debatable land. Between the Yangtse and the Yellow rivers, a considerable area was practically in Mongol hands, but isolated places here were still disputed. Kwei-chou and Yun-nan, on the west, were the homes of aboriginal tribes, constantly at variance with the Chinese, and on the east, the Yellow river then debouched farther south than its present mouth in the Gulf of Pe-chili.

The modern division of provinces was not then existent, though Manzi itself was soon afterwards divided into separate kingdoms and already boasted no less than

twelve hundred splendid cities, without counting towns and villages. But this geographical digression, emphasising the enormous extent of the Sung dominion alone, when the whole of China is so often loosely regarded as a single country, is necessary in order to understand why, before Kubilai moved against Manzi, far outlying provinces and places had first to be subdued.

The Sung Emperor, knowing nothing of the supposed treaty, lent some support to a Chinese general, who declared for him against the Mongols in the northern province of Shan-tung.

This general, on defeat, had attempted the final offensive gesture of suicide. By this, Chinese patriots, according to their belief in immortality, having unavailingly used all mortal weapons against an enemy, discharge in a passionate act and a supreme dying execration, their souls, potent to exert posthumous vengeance. His sacrifice had been prevented by his capture and execution and, when envoys from the Mongol court were sent to the Sung to enforce the treaty, they were intercepted and imprisoned by Kia-se-tao, the only man in the south who knew of its existence and who took care thus to keep the secret.

After a reign of forty years, the Sung Emperor, Li-tsong, died and was succeeded by his nephew, the effeminate prince Tu-tsong, who was more than ever in the hands of Kia-se-tao.

If his influence appeared to wane, Kia-se-tao threatened to resign, and was instantly implored by his weak master to remain, while any who denounced the impropriety of the plea were dismissed. When he felt that his position was sufficiently secure, the minister retired to a country residence, where he amused himself with women and gambling, and did not appear at the Imperial court for months at a time.

Meanwhile, the treatment of Kubilai's envoys forced the Great Khan at last to take decisive action.

The cities of Siang-yang Fu, on the south bank of the River Han, and Fan-ch'eng, on the opposite bank, command the junction of two important approaches to the southern

provinces, that from Shen-si down the Han and that from Shan-si and the north down the Pe-ho. The capture of Siang-yang, therefore, though its position north of the Yangtse placed it rather in debatable land than in Sung territory, was a necessary prelude to any attack on the actual southern empire. This step was advised by a notable Chinese officer called Liu-ching, who, when Governor of Ssu-chuan, had been calumniated by Kia-se-tao, and consequently had deserted the Sung and joined the Mongols.

So the plan of campaign was entrusted to Liu-ching, and Kia-se-tao attempted in vain to win him back. Liu-ching denounced the official who had been sent with bribes, to Kubilai, and his own position with the Mongols was confirmed. Then Liu-ching went, with a grandson of Subotai the Valiant and an army of 60,000 men, drawn from various parts of the great Mongol Empire and comprising Uigurs, Persians and Arabs, to lay siege to Siang-yang.

That great city was a centre of trade and manufacture, and capable of sustaining a long investment. It was therefore decided that it must be reduced by famine, and the operation was lengthy, arduous and of enormous extent. The siege lines embraced a mountain, three leagues from the town, and forts were built on hills to the south and east. Thus land communications were cut, but the river remained open, and the Chinese were able, despite Mongol efforts, to reinforce and revictual the place.

After a year the siege was extended to Fan-ch'eng, which was connected with its sister city by bridges of boats.

In his distant capital, the Sung Emperor heard rumours of the siege, and referred the question to Kia-se-tao.

"It is a lie," said Kia-se-tao. "There is no siege. The Mongols would not venture against the majesty of the Son of Heaven."

And the Sung Emperor was satisfied. But secretly Kia-se-tao discovered who had been responsible for the disquieting news and had that person executed, under another accusation.

Truth will out. The rumour rose again. More questions were asked, and at last Kia-se-tao sent a relieving force, which was, however, cut to pieces.

Kubilai reinforced the besiegers by marching 20,000 men to the seat of war. Yet, after four years, the twin cities still held out, with immense courage, boasting that they needed nothing but supplies of salt, straw and silk.

The Chinese commandant of another town, some miles down the river, heard their need and undertook to supply it. He built a flotilla and offered high rewards to all who would serve it. Three thousand volunteers vowed to sail the junks into Siang-yang, or perish in the attempt. They entered the river Han, three abreast, the centre junk loaded with the required commodities, and attached to the other two, which were filled with armed warriors. Stones, blazing arrows and burning coals were hurled on the two divisions of the Mongol army, which occupied both banks. The flotilla forced its way through all resistance and, to the frantic welcome of war gongs, trumpets and shouts of delight, burst into beleaguered Siang-yang.

One of the commanders of this heroic enterprise was killed in the fight. Another was seized in a desperate hand-to-hand conflict with the Mongols, on his return down the river, but, bloodstained and spent, he still refused to yield and was slain. To show him honour, they released four prisoners to carry his body back to Siang-yang.

And still the siege continued. For three more years it went on, with oriental patience and oriental disregard of time.

And during this period no other attack was made on Sung territory, for Kubilai was thorough, like his grandfather Chingiz, and he remembered the last words of Chingiz, " The glory of an action is that it should be complete."

At last, Kubilai, on the advice of an Uigur general, summoned special engineers, skilled in making mangonels and ballistas, from Persia. Ala'ed din of Miafarakain and his pupil, Ismael of Herat, came and were raised to military

rank. They exhibited the improvements that they had made in siege engines (an improvement probably consisting in main of the use of the counterpoised lever to replace man-haulage) before the Great Khan at Ta Tu, and then took their machines to Siang-yang and Fan-ch'eng.

According to a later Chinese account: "The noise made by the machines and the crash of the shot, as it broke through everything in its fall, caused great alarm in the garrison."

The walls of Fan-ch'eng were breached, as many other walls in Persia had been broken long since, by Mongol armies using the same devices.

Thus they gained access to the suburbs of Fan-ch'eng and burned the bridge that connected the city with Siang-yang.

The commander killed himself, but his spirit could not stay the Mongol advance. The Chinese inhabitants fought from street to street, setting fire to their own buildings. As they were driven back, they threw themselves into the flames.

The catapults were then turned on Siang-yang. The people were terror-stricken; but when Liu-ching, the Chinese general of the Mongol army, proposed a parley with the commandant of the fortress, fear did not prevent their renewed attack. The siege might have proceeded till Siang-yang was obliterated, had not a sudden message come from Kubilai. It was read out in a loud voice below the walls of the city:

"O warriors of Siang-yang! The splendid defence that you have conducted for five years covers you with glory. Each faithful subject should serve his own sovereign with his life blood. But to sacrifice thousands of people through stubbornness, is that reasonable or proper, especially for you who are without aid or hope of it? Submit and no harm will meet any one. We promise to give each of you honourable employment. . . . We pledge our true word of an Emperor that you shall be satisfied." *

The message was characteristic of Kubilai. Siang-yang

* Curtin.

was surrendered without further loss of life, and the commandant and all his officers retained their posts under Mongol rule.

The campaign against the Sung then proceeded under that notable young Mongol general, Bayan of the Hundred Eyes, who has already been mentioned and of whom more will be heard. Meanwhile Kubilai passed his time between Ta Tu, his Great Capital, and Shang Tu, his City of Peace.

He was at Shang Tu one summer, two years after the fall of Siang-yang, when suddenly he received wonderful news. An embassy from the Far West, consisting of three gentlemen who gave the name of Polo, had arrived in the distant frontier land of Tangut (the modern province of Kansu) and were now travelling northwards to reach him.

He had not forgotten them or their mission.

During the interval of nine years since he had seen them, he may have had his doubts. He may have wondered whether these Latins had sufficient perception of the principle Jên to fulfil its dictates.

Now he rejoiced exceedingly. The Polos were returning to prove to him that they were men who stood in the right relationship to their fellows. And, though his inquiries elicited the fact that they were not accompanied by those one hundred able teachers for whom he had asked, but only by one additional young member of their family, they, personally, must have been inspired by a great faith and a true religion.

While he awaited them eagerly, he traced their journey on a Chinese map.

Since they had entered Tangut, through the famous Jade Gate (a mountain defile crowned by a fortress, and so called because by this way the precious stone had always been brought from Khotan into China), they must have traversed the terrible desert of Lop and have come to Su-chau, where Mongol outposts were stationed and where the great cave temples, for which the place is still famous, must have calmed their fears.

Tangut had long since been ravaged, but her Buddhist shrines were still inviolate. Old in learning was she and beautifully had her feet moved in the paths of peace; amid those caverns painted with sublime forms in glowing colours, amid those colossal and beatific figures, seated in perpetual contemplation, or outstretched to enter on perpetual rest. No conqueror had ever disturbed the serenity of those holy places. No intruder could ever touch their remote and solemn calm. The Polos must indeed have looked and wondered with much to learn.

From Su-chau, Kubilai heard, they had been speeded on to Kan-chau, an important town, where they had received an escort of Mongols and, thus proceeding through Tangut, they had crossed the plain of the northern bend of the Yellow river and the Great Wall into the upper part of Shan-si province. They were still moving northward towards the Kalgan defile.

He must show them particular honour and give them special welcome.

While they were still forty days' distance from Shang Tu, he sent his highest officers to meet them and to conduct them like kings to his presence.

When they arrived, a general holiday was proclaimed and the beauties of the city were enhanced by the display of banners and gayly dressed crowds. Once more, to show honour to his guests, Kubilai wore his robes and headdress of the Son of Heaven, but this time he gave them immediate and private audience in the reception room of the bamboo palace.

Before he came to greet them there, he trembled with eagerness. All the interest of his life was bound up with the Polos. They might bring incalculable benefits from the West to his Empire, and he particularly desired to show the critical Chinese the value of his personal influence. Further, he had never been so attracted by any men. He felt an extraordinary sympathy for them, and he valued their opinion highly.

They had surely not changed, but would they consider that he had altered?

His position was now established. At his present age of sixty-one, he had passed the prime of life, but his heart was still young and he still loved what was new and strange.

Accompanied by his wife Jambui and her four sons, and attended by a few favoured courtiers, he entered the audience chamber and advanced straightway to the Polos, who, at the first sight of him, remembered to perform the kow-tow.

He raised Niccolo and Maffeo to their feet and said, "This gives me great happiness. West and East have met again. We are all one family."

Then he led them, one by each hand, to his throne and made them sit beside him, while all the others gathered round to listen and young Marco remained in the background.

"Tell me of your welfare, my friends," said Kubilai. "Tell me how you have sped. For indeed it warms my heart to see you again, and I would hear all your adventures."

"Sire," answered Niccolo, "this only matters, that we have sped well, seeing that we find you safe and in good health."

They did not find him altered. They had not changed. They were still the same courteous and lovable gentlemen that he had welcomed before.

"And though, by a mischance, we have not brought with us the one hundred divines and scholars," said Maffeo, "we have here, Sire, letters, credentials and presents from His Holiness the Pope, which might have been delivered before, but that there was no Pope."

"We have also brought, as we promised, some oil from the Holy Sepulchre of our Lord and Saviour," said Niccolo.

"The which," added Maffeo, gravely reminding, "is considered by us a very sacred talisman."

"Gentlemen, I thank you," said Kubilai, "as much for your courageous enterprise as for what you have brought, which assuredly I shall honour. But, though you say you came alone, did not I see one other in your company?"

" Sire," said Niccolo, beckoning to Marco, " this is my son and your liege man."

Marco approached and knelt before the throne. The brown eyes of the ruler of the largest empire the world has ever known met the grey eyes, eager and visionary, of the youth, who had travelled half across the earth to come here.

In that moment, Kubilai saw his conception of a perfect human being, as superior to the older Polos as they seemed to him superior to other men. All that Kubilai sought, the glamour of what was new and strange, the romance of adventure, the poetry of life upon its threshold, seemed concentrated in this young being. And his heart went out to Marco in love and trust passing what he could ever feel for his own sons.

Between himself and Marco there was no barrier of race or age or rank. Here was complete confidence, absolute sympathy, an instinctive sense of natural and right relationship.

It was one of those manifestations of Jên, so unusual and so contrary to reason as to be miraculous.

Marco had not yet the maturity fully to realise it. All he knew was that the Great Khan proved to be most surprisingly a friend—no monarch of overwhelming magnificence, but a true and splendid elder man who might be dearer to him than his own father; some one besides who surely belonged to the Company of the Free, and could understand the glory of Winged Creatures. . . .

" Gentlemen," said Kubilai gently, after that moment, " nothing that you have brought, or could have brought, pleases me more than this young gallant. I hope that he may always stay near me."

CHAPTER XIV

THE Polos, who had spent three and a half years on their journey, found themselves honoured before any other men at the court of Shang Tu, and their natural good manners made them universal favourites and prevented jealousy alike with Mongols, Chinese and Persians.

One of the first friends of former days, for whom they inquired, was Bayan of the Hundred Eyes, who had so long ago met them in the city of Bokhara and had first conducted them here.

They did not see him again yet, for, as the most notable general of his age, he was perpetually serving Kubilai in the field of war, hastening to and fro between the campaign against the Sung in the south-east and the frontier skirmishes, which had lately developed into war, against Kaidu Khan, the irrepressible enemy in the west. Here he was at present engaged.

But the Polos now heard about his preliminary exploits in China, following the siege of Siang-yang and Fan-ch'eng. They were particularly interested in the accounts of this siege, but not best pleased when their Mongol informants claimed that the knowledge of armaments in the East was superior to that of the West, as shown by the use of an improved type of siege engine.

An argument resulted, with some confusion due as much to the term " western " as to the difficulties of the language. The Mongols were willing to allow that, as the new siege engines had come from Persia, they belonged to a western country in relation to China. But, as this country was eastern in relation to Europe, their contention held good; the East was ahead of the Far West, unless the Polos knew of better catapults in their own land.

They did not, but stoutly and stubbornly they maintained their point; western knowledge had been proved superior to eastern; therefore Europe no doubt already used the same siege engines, and had they (the Polos) arrived in time for the investment of Siang-yang, they could have recommended the same improvements to Kubilai Khan.

Marco listened to this involved question entranced. In years to come, his good memory was misled by the proper pride of father and uncle to the belief that they were present at the siege of Siang-yang, and that the use of new siege engines was due to their enlightened western advice.

The mistake is a nice touch of human nature in the otherwise irrefutable chronicle of Marco Polo, and gains colour from the fact that he never quite remembered the place name of that memorable siege: for Siang-yang in his book is recorded as Saianfu.

With regard to their old friend Bayan, they heard nothing but glowing accounts, from Chinese as from Mongols, of his character and of his capacity.

"He is fearless and irreproachable," they were told, and little guessed that those very words would be applied in a later generation to Bayan's counterpart of the West, Bayard, the Preux Chevalier. "His name signifies noble, and it fits his princely birth and his appearance well."

"He is never seen sad," said one Chinese, "except when he is forced to shed blood. He spares even the blood of the enemy, and his modesty is not inferior to his ability."

"The Great Khan has made him Minister of State in the north," said another Chinese, "and no one could imagine a greater contrast than exists between him and the Sung Minister of State, Kia-se-tao."

"The Sung dynasty must surely fear Bayan," said the first Chinese, "for it has been foretold that they will never lose their empire, except through the agency of a man with a hundred eyes."

"Kia-se-tao has doubtless kept Bayan's name from the Sung Emperor," said the second man, "or else he has not

enough sense to know that the word Pai-yen has, in the sense of a pun, that very meaning."

"And how has Bayan used his hundred eyes so far?" inquired Niccolo Polo.

Apparently, after the fall of Siang-yang, he had advanced southwards down the River Han, with a flotilla and a large army. When he had found the river blocked with armed vessels and chains, he had landed his own boats, had dragged them overland to a lake, and had re-entered the river below it.

No resistance had been able to stop his impetuous onslaught.

The Chinese army, organised to meet him, had been instantly defeated, and town after town, on both banks of the Han river, had fallen to his arms, despite the courage of their defence.

The Mongol forces had reached the point where the Han river joins the Yangtse, but a considerable Chinese fleet had not prevented them from crossing the Yangtse and occupying both banks.

Han-kow, Han-yang and Wu-chang had surrendered, and the strategical key to the whole of the southern position had thus been lost.

"The waters of the Yangtse were covered with burning vessels and dyed with blood," the Polos heard, "and all important towns were captured or delivered. But, in most of them, Chinese governors were reinstated. The military officers of the Sung knew that they were betrayed in the rear by Kia-se-tao, who is the actual ruler of the southern empire, and they began to desert and join the Mongols. No one in all that realm is hated by the Chinese army as Kia-se-tao is hated."

Yet it seemed that even Kia-se-tao had realised at last the necessity for action. Suddenly all the wealthy inhabitants of Manzi had found themselves heavily taxed. They had been able to pay and, though they had never learned to fight, they had been ready to defend their country.

"You should have seen the great fleet of junks that

Kia-se-tao prepared on the Yangtse river," said a Mongol warrior who had been with Bayan. "It covered ten miles of water. From the fleet, envoys came in boats, carrying all sorts of southern fruits, piled high in glowing basket-loads, and an offer to conclude peace on the terms of the original treaty. That was all very well. We did not doubt that the Sung Emperor would be willing now to acknowledge himself Kubilai Khan's vassal and to pay high tribute. But Bayan was not going to trust Kia-se-tao's good faith again, on the strength of a few boat loads of fruit, backed by an armed fleet."

"Did he refuse to parley?" said Maffeo.

"He did, and we fought them on both banks of the river and on its islands. Kia-se-tao retired eastward with his flotilla and sought to increase his strength further, but no one would serve him. So we followed him up and surrounded the lurking fleet. And out of his two thousand five hundred junks, there were only left a few broken hulks, drifting on the stained water, to tell the tale of that defeat."

"It might never have happened," said a Chinese, "had the Sung Emperor followed better advice."

"That is true enough. When Bayan took the city of Kien-kang, he found a memorial note advising a plan of action for the southern armies, left by the governor who had killed himself. It had evidently been presented to Kia-se-tao and returned in scorn. When Bayan read it, he said, 'Is it possible that such wise council should not have been taken? Had it been, we should not be here.'"

"That indeed showed Bayan's generous spirit," said Niccolo. "But why, when he was so successful, was he recalled from China?"

"It happened as the hot season of this year was at hand. The Great Khan, who always considers his troops, knew that we Mongols do not bear heat well, and advised Bayan to desist till later. Bayan answered, 'We have the enemy by the throat. It is no time to give him fresh breath.' And we all wanted to go on. But we had to hold our hand for a time, while envoys went to and fro. The

Sung are treacherous. Our first envoy had been imprisoned by them, and when released had reached the north in a dying condition. Yet Kubilai forgave and sent another embassy, which, carrying peace proposals, passed through Bayan's headquarters and enjoined an armistice. This embassy, proceeding southwards, was attacked by a Sung force and its leaders murdered. When Bayan protested, he was told that the Sung authorities were not responsible. The soul of honour himself, he believed the lie and sent an envoy of his own. The man was basely assassinated, and Bayan, who is just as well as merciful, demanded permission then to continue hostilities. But the Great Khan was beset on the west by his old enemy and cousin, Kaidu. And there was no one so strong as Bayan to send against Kaidu. So back he came, and I with him, as far as Shang Tu to nurse an old wound."

"Does the war against the Sung still go forward?" asked Niccolo.

"Ay, under one of our generals called Alihaya, who is an able man and was made governor of Wu-chang. But he cannot compare with Bayan, and the war will not be finished till Bayan can return from the west. When that happens, I shall be healed and will surely ride with him again."

"You love him well," said Maffeo, "and I am not surprised, for even I remember him with affection and want to see him again."

"There is none like him, none," said the hard-bitten warrior with fierce enthusiasm. "He is the hero of his men, and such chivalry has he shown to the enemy, that they cannot fail to extol him. Wherever, in the south, the Chinese killed themselves rather than meet defeat, Bayan gave them honourable burial. And, at a place called Chih-chow, on the right bank of the Yangtse, I myself saw him, with tears in his eyes, performing, on his knees, the funeral ceremonies, not only of the commander of that city but of a woman, his wife. The circumstance was certainly peculiar."

"Tell us," said Niccolo, scenting a story.

And, in his own words, the Mongol warrior told them, from hearsay, the story of the Little Wife.

The Chinese commander of the city of Chih-chow was called Chao-mao. He was a strong man of indomitable pride, and had followed the moral maxim, "In selecting a wife, let a man take care that she be his inferior."

This did not mean that he was not profoundly attached to his little bride, Yong-chi, a lady of parts and of good family. But both he and she were naturally aware that she was in no sense the equal of any man.

The superior sex were always reasonable and brave, except when, like the despicable Kia-se-tao, they consorted over much with women. Yong-chi, like other females, knew little of logic, though she was addicted to the study of the classics and had a surprising trick of intelligent appreciation. Also, like other females, she was deplorably timid, except in danger.

These contradictory virtues might have aroused antagonism in a man more patient than Chao-mao, since wisdom cannot be accepted from inexperience and courage in the weak is pretension. But Yong-chi was so like some charming child and withal so beautiful, that he was ready to forgive even her vanities.

When, in her clinging primrose-coloured silks, adorned with jewels of jade and coral and pearl, she cried in her soft voice: "Our numbers in Manzi are like the sands of the Kiang. With able leaders, we could resist the Mongols for ever!" he deplored her sense, but admired the curve of her willow-leaf eyebrows.

When, before the enemy reached Chih-chow, she steadfastly refused to leave the place and him, he groaned over her obstinacy, but was delighted by her feminine devotion to himself.

The Mongols came on, overwhelmingly, like the waters of the great river. Nothing could stop them. They were as boats carried on furious rapids through the Yangtse gorges, and no rock could wreck them or bar their way.

His subordinates advised Chao-mao to surrender at once. He refused. There was dissension in the city, and his officers plotted against him.

He held his head high and said: "We will resist. Though every other place is given up, though the Empire is falling, here it shall be preserved against the Fools of the North."

But he knew that the policy of resignation must prevail, and that he was surrounded by traitors. His heart did not fail, but it was troubled for his little wife, that tender flower, Yong-chi. When hope was finally abandoned, he, unable to survive disgrace, could still boldly release his soul against the detested enemy. But she, probably having no soul, or at most an inferior one, must be saved alive.

He laid his plans for her protection very carefully. Not till everything that manly foresight could arrange and selfless heroism could inspire did he reveal his mind. Then he invited all those friends who were already treating with the Mongols to a great banquet.

Never had he held so ceremonious and magnificent a feast. Pickle broth, tea of fritters and onions, soup of birds' nests, fat carp boiled in gravy, fresh trout fried with mushrooms, peacocks roasted whole in their feathers, venison grilled with peaches and green peas, and capons stuffed with goose liver were but a few of the dishes. Rice wine flowed freely, and the little lady Yong-chi herself headed her maidens to serve the guests.

When the sweetmeats of caramel sugar and crystallised fruits were handed, Yong-chi, flushed and radiant, with a coronet of kingfisher feather enamel and gold surmounting the intricate loops of her black hair, took the seat of honour indicated to her by her lord on his left side.

Chao-mao had eaten nothing, but now he raised a cup of rock crystal filled with clear golden-coloured tea and said, "Honourable friends, it is hoped that satisfied appetites may continue in the path of peace."

The complimentary sounds of digestion answered him.

"Accept," continued Chao-mao, "the contents of this

cup, and, as it is passed from one to the other, taste and take it that I shall drink later to your prosperity, in full appreciation of your judgment. The decision to surrender the city is reasonable. I approve, but am unable to survive it in this world. From the next, my unworthy conscience dictates that I should continue the defence of our country. Therefore, after this poor entertainment, I intend to partake alone of a draught to release my soul."

The cup of ceremony was passed round the circle of the guests, and each, sobered or sickened, according to his nature, by the words of Chao-mao, sipped the strong tea. All were too shamed to make any protest.

"But before departure," said Chao-mao, "let truth inspire caution. Arrangements have been made that my wife, the lady Yong-chi, shall secretly leave the city tonight, in the care of a faithful servant. Nothing is hidden between friends. I reveal this, so that in case it is discovered and any attempt is made to prevent it, or to augment the risk by more than two persons escaping, my soul will surely know and recognise other enemies than those of the north."

The guest on Chao-mao's right side protested that he was ready to serve the lady in any way possible. Murmurs of agreement rose from the others. All were enchanted to have their shame relieved by this confidence, and all, disliking the pride of Chao-mao and oblivious to the power of his soul, began to wonder privately how they could best arrange for Yong-chi and her servant to carry their valuables out of the city.

The lady herself rose at this point, smilingly made obeisance to the company, and left the table. Jugglers then performed for the delectation and further relief of the guests, who, by the time the entertainment was over, had forgotten everything but their own interests.

Wearied, Chao-mao went to his private apartment, and wrote a fair statement of his intention, which was to be left for the eyes of the curious. He then wrote a letter of farewell to his wife, since a personal visit might unduly disturb her, and, summoning the servant who was to escort

her out of the city, gave him the letter for delivery and with it final instructions.

Free at last of all earthly responsibility, he ordered freshly brewed tea, took from the secret drawer of a cabinet of black lacquer a phial filled with colourless liquid, and stretched himself on a couch, beside which the tea was served. He then gave his mind to pleasant contemplation of the future.

He saw himself invincible and still more free, in a realm where all were patriots. From this realm, captains among the ghosts rode on the wings of the wind and on the rays of heavenly bodies against their foes. Unhidden behind walls, undeterred by strong defences, untrammelled by traitors, they rode. And the enemy was as the dust of their passing, and their triumphant banners were bright as dawn. . . .

Suddenly the little wife, Yong-chi, was standing by the couch, and gazing at him with a tremulous smile.

" My lord," she said, " forgive this presumption, but am I not worthy to accompany you ? "

The ridiculous child ! By now she should have started ! She must have had his letter. Did she dream of disobedience ? He sprang up with a frown, ready for rage.

And she laid her little hands like flowers against his face, and he saw that her eyes were wet. Chao-mao took both those little hands in one of his and patted them.

And he laughed and said, " One journey for you, child, and another for me. Where I go, females are not required."

" What am I that you should need me ? " she answered. " Yet is not it true, that even immortal warriors must sometimes rest ? "

He sat down and she stood at his knee. Her height hardly reached the level of his heart. He explained to her gently that she could only be safe if she left the city to-night ; that it was settled that she should go to the keeping of her own family, who lived peacefully in the far south ; that she might even attain great merit, personally, as his faithful widow.

She listened attentively, and said, " Pardon me, dear sir, but should not women cleave to their lords before they become widows ? "

He put his arm about her—the little, silly thing, and she nestled against his shoulder. He told her that the first duty of a wife is obedience, and the next patience ; that women should wait for the lordship of Death and not seek it ; that the path men tread is not for them.

She replied, " Since you have honoured me with your love, are we not one flesh ? How then can I tread another road, and how can we be separated ? "

He hid his eyes against her breast.

" The path of glory is hard to take, O Yong-chi ! and the gate to it is pain. It is not seemly that women should suffer."

She laughed. " Can they not bear children, my lord ? And which is easier, to meet Death or to bestow Life ? "

He was silent, and she took from him the phial of poison and poured it into a cup which she filled with tea.

For the first time, a frightful doubt invaded the mind of Chao-mao. Was this indeed the way to eternal life ? Had not even the Perfect Sage refused any certain answer, saying only, " When thou art dead thou wilt know " ?

Yong-chi held the cup in her hands and said, " O my lord ! will you drink first or shall I ? "

There was no doubt in the grave innocence of her face. But, when she had spoken, she put the cup to her lips and drank.

Then he took it from her and drank also, and threw the cup aside, and drew her to sit beside him on the couch. And he held her and said, " You shall ride with me—surely you shall ride among heroes."

" I am small," she answered. " If you take me on your saddle-bow, I shall be no great weight."

After a little time, Chao-mao muttered, " The light is burning low."

And she replied, " The moon will light us, my lord."

A shudder shook his body, and he said, " It is cold."

She put her arms around him and answered, " Dearest lord, take warmth from me."

He whispered at last: "Beloved, help, I suffer!"
The little wife put her lips to his ear.
"It will pass," she breathed, and so died.

While the Polos remained at Shang Tu, during the summer of their arrival, they heard further news of the campaign against the Sung, now proceeding under the Mongol general Alihaya, and further stories to arouse their interest in the southern Chinese. The city of Wu-chang, which Alihaya had governed, had been attacked from the immediate south, and the war against the Sung Empire was temporarily diverted from the eastern provinces and was directed principally against the central provinces of Manzi.

Everywhere the Mongol arms were victorious, in spite of Bayan's absence and in spite of desperate defence. Almost everywhere the intrepid governors of Chinese towns preferred death to surrender.

There was the startling case of one city in Hu-nan, where, when the walls were stormed, the commander of the garrison appeared with his two young sons near a wooden gate tower, which was already burning. The three had no weapons in their hands, but, in face of the enemy, the father ceremoniously invested his children with the official bonnet which, like the Roman toga, was the ancient Chinese symbol of manhood. Then, followed by their attendants, one and all rushed into the blazing gate-tower and perished.

Meanwhile, the governor of the city, in his own house, summoned a faithful slave, whom he commanded to put himself and all his family to death. The slave prostrated himself, but refused to perform the fearful deed.

"I am responsible for the safety of my people," said Li-fu, the governor. "Therefore, though I might with propriety take my own life, it is not seemly that I should also kill my wife and children. They are ready to die, but must be spared from suicide. Consider, O slave, does not your duty enjoin obedience?"

"Lord," cried the wretched man, "my love for you is

stronger than any sense of duty. Kill me, but while I am conscious, do not ask this service of me!"

"Alas! it is easy to become unconscious of a deed," answered Li-fu mildly.

And he insisted on the slave drinking a draught of potent wine to overrule his judgment. When the man was intoxicated, Li-fu said to him, "Have you now sufficient strength to eschew all weakness and to earn my blessing?"

"I will obey," answered the slave, "but I follow you."

And when he had slain Li-fu and the family of Li-fu, with a sharp sword, he went out and set fire to the house. Thereupon, he ran to his own dwelling and killed his own wife and children, and finally himself fell upon the sword.

The rest of the inhabitants of the city, with the exception of one miserable refugee, who ultimately recounted the event, copied these examples, and the Mongols entered a deserted place, where only Death ruled.

Another captured town, in Kiang-si province, was long remembered for the courage of its commander, Mi-yan. Wounded by four arrows and three lance thrusts, he made alone a last desperate rush upon the enemy, across a wooden bridge. A plank broke beneath his feet. He stumbled and fell. But he was gently raised and carried to shelter by the Mongols. They begged him to leave a hopeless cause and to enter their service, and the voice of his own son was raised to endorse the plea.

"We have to deal with foes so generous that they may well be reckoned as our friends, O my father! If we do not accept what they offer, we die forsaken. If we join them, we remain rich and powerful."

Mi-yan staggered to his feet. "My son," he answered, "fear not poverty, fear only disgrace. If you find yourself forsaken, appear in the public square of any city and say your father was Mi-yan. Every one will then help you." He divested himself of his robe and turned to the Mongol officers. "I am now ready," he said to them. "Since I refuse to make terms, it is your duty to execute me."

Such heroes, Marco felt, could only belong to the Company of the Free, and in an old Chinese poem he found one day their fitting eulogy.

"They were more than brave; they were inspired with the spirit of Wu.*
Steadfast to the end, they could not be daunted.
Their bodies were stricken, but their souls have taken Immortality.
Captains among the ghosts, heroes among the dead." †

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* *I.e.* military genius.

† "Battle," by Ch'u Yuan (332–295 B.C.), translated by A. Waley.

CHAPTER XV

But Marco's time was not entirely spent in listening to stories. Kubilai had advised that he should immediately apply himself with able teachers to the study of languages, so that, if he proved discreet and prudent, he might be fitted for a government appointment.

And Marco was wise enough to recognise a marvellous opportunity. He might have remained in Venice all his life. He might have travelled at farthest to the coasts of the Crimea or Syria, on some trading venture that led to little renown. Now, if he could himself unlock the door of the spoken word, half the world was open to him.

He seized his chance and showed an extraordinary aptitude for languages, mastering during the next few years Mongol, Arabic, Uigur and a little Chinese. He was diligent also in learning the customs of the Mongols, their history and their methods of warfare. And everything he saw and heard, then and thereafter, he memorised and noted besides in a book.

While Marco was embarking on this enterprise at Shang Tu, Niccolo and Maffeo were relating their adventures to Kubilai and telling him all they could about the Christian religion.

It was obvious that the Great Khan could not adopt that faith for his State and for himself, since accredited teachers of the Church had failed to come. Yet during his reign true Christianity and all other religions founded on Jên flourished.

The Polos were the first missioners to prove to the Mongols that the West was not behind the East in the perception of truth. They paved the way for Archbishop John of Montecorvino, Friar Odoric and many others, who came later and were highly honoured.

In August the Polos went with Kubilai to Ta Tu, and there saw his magnificent and comparatively new palace. The Imperial demesne was enclosed within two brick walls, the outer one of which was whitewashed and loop-holed like the city wall and set with eight towers, where all the arms of war were stored. Between each wall there was a wide space, and in each southern façade there were five gateways. In the central area, which abutted on the outer northern wall, stood the palace, which was of one storey only in height, but was raised above the ground, first by a basement forming a shallow terrace, and above this by a marble wall. On its four sides a marble staircase led to the summit of this wall, which was edged with a pillared balustrade. Here the actual residence was sculptured with the gilded figures of kings, dragons, animals and birds, and roofed with tiles of various colours, so highly glazed that they shone like enamel.

Within the palace there were many apartments, and the central hall, large enough to hold six thousand people, was supported with twenty-four gilded columns and hung with red leather. Its only other decoration was a double row of life-size peacocks in pure gold, which, by some secret mechanism, could, at a given signal, flap their wings.

The space between the outer and inner walls of the Imperial precinct was converted into a grassy park, crossed by raised and paved roadways. Here every kind of small game was preserved and here on the north-west, was a gourd-shaped lake, fed by a river, filled with fish and spanned by lovely bridges.

The earth dug from this lake formed a large hill immediately to the north of the palace. It was known as the Green Mount, for it was entirely covered with ever-green trees, and even the ground from which they grew was sprinkled with carbonate of copper, so that when moist it should assume the tint of verdigris. On the summit of the Green Mount was a green pavilion, in the hall of which stood an immense wine jar of black jade, veined with white and carved in these veinings with fish and animals.

Thus Kubilai had in his Great Capital a worthy abode, a place at once august and enchanting, sternly dignified as befitted his power, yet lightened by a wistful charm to suit his personality.

Here presently Bayan returned from his campaign in the west for Kubilai's birthday feast, and then the Polos met him once more. For this great annual occasion, which took place in September, Kubilai was arrayed in robes of beaten gold and surrounded with throngs of gaily dressed courtiers, among whom Bayan was not the least splendid figure. Yet it seemed to the Polos that their friend of former days had altered. He was as kind and alert as ever, but he had aged, and his expression was sterner. He had surely passed, not unscathed, through the fire of experience and, if he owed his consideration for others to the ordeal, time was still required to obliterate the scars he had suffered.

He would not linger at Ta Tu though Kubilai invited him to stay for the New Year festival in February, and even longer to go with the Court to the Imperial Hunting Ground in March.

Bayan answered, as before, that the war against the Sung must be concluded, and that it was no time to give that enemy fresh breath.

"Duty is my mistress, O Khan!" he added, with his rare smile. "There is no joy like that of good accomplishment."

So back went Bayan, in the early winter, to Manzi, and Marco, who would gladly have gone with him, pondered the words he had spoken and longed to know him better. Bayan never talked about himself, but surely the private life of such a man must be full of interest.

"Is the great general Bayan married?" he one day asked the Lama Teacher who was helping him to study the newly constructed Mongol alphabet.

"Nay. It is a strange thing for his race; but, it is said, no stranger than for Kaidu's daughter."

"Is that the Kaidu Khan against whom Bayan has been fighting?"

"Ay, verily. Kaidu invaded the Uigur country and invited the alliance of their chief, who refused and was relieved by a Mongol army led by some of the Imperial princes. But these princes quarrelled among themselves, wherefore Bayan was sent to restore order and hold Kaidu in check. He has now done that, but we shall hear more of Kaidu. He is truculent and brave, like all Mongols, and humane besides, but he is so determined to overthrow Kubilai that he will make an alliance with the chiefs of Manchuria and attack next from the north."

"What of his daughter? Does Bayan love her?"

"These are the idle questions of youth," said the Teacher, gravely. "Let us return to your studies."

"I will work for an extra hour to-morrow. Good sir, tell me the romance of Bayan."

"I know of no romance connected with Bayan. . . . There is only the rumour that he went gladly to the west, when he heard that Kaidu's daughter was fighting at her father's side."

"Did he hope to meet her in combat? That would be a strange way of loving. And she must be a strange lady to go out like a warrior."

"How should I say what he hoped? Who knows what has ever been in Bayan's heart? But any one could tell you the story of Kaidu's daughter."

"I will listen with attention."

"Ah! youth—youth!" sighed the Teacher, who was not himself old, and presently began: "It seems that Kaidu Khan has no less than forty sons, and fourteen of them are the brothers of his only daughter, whom he loves better than them all. Her name is Katulun, and it is said that she is still beautiful and very strong. Many years ago her favourite diversion was the Mongol art of wrestling. While yet of a tender age, she would join the men of her father's court, as they competed for great cheeses, and from them she learned the art, till she could compete also with the best. This was while Kaidu was establishing his power and before he moved against Kubilai.

"The time came when it was considered advisable that

the lady Katulun should be given in marriage. But she laughed the idea to scorn and said that she was no chattel to be bestowed on any man, and that she would never wed till she found one stronger than herself, or cunning enough to overcome her. And at last, Kaidu, her father, agreed that any man who came to try a fall with her, should do so on the condition that, if she vanquished him, she would win from him one hundred horses, but that if he vanquished her, he should win her to wife.

"Then many princes and noble youths came to try their strength against her, not only in pride that a maiden should dare to offer such a challenge, but in love—for indeed the maiden was fair to look upon, shapely as a goddess and of a pretty wit.

"But she threw them all, and thus won more than ten thousand horses, and kept her virgin heart.

"There came at last from a distant land a young warrior prince, renowned for his great valour and skill."

"And was his name Bayan?" put in Marco.

"How should I know his name? Who shall say that it was Bayan? . . . He was glorious like the morning, and he rode into the great courtyard of Kaidu's palace on his richly caparisoned horse. Here, on the pavement, the lady Katulun, dressed like a boy, was testing the strength of her muscles, lifting heavy weights. He called to her, thinking her a servant.

"'Hola, you! I come to answer the challenge of Kaidu's daughter.'

"She came and took his bridle rein, and laughing said, 'You are welcome. I am Katulun.'

"Then he dismounted and said to her, 'Will you indeed wrestle with me, lady?'

"She answered, 'That will I!'

"He told her that no Mongol could vie with him, and asked if she did not fear to be beaten. She replied, 'I fear no one.' But she could not meet his eyes.

"He said, 'I have brought with me one thousand splendid horses. That will show you that I fear no one either, for, should you overcome me, the stake will be yours.'

" She answered, with a lip that trembled, ' I have already more horses than I can count. Yours shall swell the number.'

" Then she led him in to her father that the business might be settled. But, as they passed a red rose tree flowering near a fountain, he plucked a bud and gave it to her, laughing. And she laughed also and hid the bud in her bosom.

" When Kaidu Khan and his wife realised how powerful and how staunch was this new suitor for the hand of Katulun, they approved him mightily, and in private sent for their daughter and advised her to have done with wrestling and prepare for marriage.

" But Katulun said, ' O my father! am not I still your daughter and therefore is not my honour precious? I have taken an oath that I will be wife to no man who is not stronger than I. And you have sworn that I shall not be bestowed as a chattel. Are these vows to be broken, because one comes whose face is like the morning? Is our pride to be sacrificed, lest perchance we lose one thousand horses? ' "

" Her heart had surely been touched by the sight of Bayan, who must indeed have been good to look upon when he was young," interposed Marco.

" Who said that she ever beheld Bayan? But Kaidu saw that her heart was touched at last. And he thought that through that she would be beaten, even if the young prince was not stronger than she.

" So the time and place of the wrestling match were appointed. It was to be at midday in the great open hall of the palace. And an immense crowd gathered to watch that conflict, all Kaidu's people and all the followers of the young prince. But not one of that company hoped to see the lady win, for some who loved her looked for her married happiness, and some who did not love her looked for her pride to be broken.

" Then Katulun came forth dressed in a straight jerkin of fine white wool, and presently the young prince came forth opposite, dressed in a jerkin of rose-red silk. Their

arms and legs were bare, and the lady wore in the close-rolled plaits of her black hair a red rosebud.

"And so beautiful were they both to look upon, in their clean-limbed youth and strength, that a shout of admiration went up from the whole company, and there was not one present who did not think what a race of giants might spring from the mating of those two.

"They took their places in the middle of the hall and, at a given signal, they grappled each other by the arms. And so they stayed, locked together but apart, putting forth their strength till the muscles swelled on their necks and on their arms and on their legs like carved marble. Now their figures swayed this way and that, and now their bare feet stamped the pavement, and now they relaxed and gripped again.

"But for a long time neither could get the better of the other, though the faces of both were set like rock and bedewed with sweat. Fairly and finely they wrestled, so that it was wonderful to see.

"And at last, with a mighty effort, the lady used that secret skilful grip of which she was the master, and threw the young prince flat on the pavement.

"A roar in praise of her valour burst from the onlookers, despite themselves, and standing over her opponent's body, she raised her white arms above her head in a gesture of exultation.

"But next moment she was on her knees beside him, and all heard her cry, tender as a mother, 'My lord, are you hurt?'

"He raised his head and sat up. He answered: 'You have won my thousand horses.'

"She said, in a broken voice, 'I do not want your horses.'

"And it was clear to all what she wanted.

"He sprang to his feet, and his face was dark as night. She stood up beside him, and he looked her in the eyes.

"'I too have my pride, lady,' he said.

"And he strode out of the hall into the courtyard and

rode away without another word, and without his thousand horses.

" Then Kaidu's daughter looked neither to the right, nor to the left, but straight before her with her head held high, like a young warrior. And ever since, like a young warrior, she has ridden with her father to the wars. But never has she wrestled again with any man, and never has she wed."

The Lama Teacher ended with a sigh and a smile.

Marco Polo nodded gravely. " So that is why Bayan has never married, either," he said. " And that is why he still hopes to meet Kaidu's daughter again in the field of war."

In the month of March, Kubilai, accompanied by the Polos, left the splendid and varied entertainments of his capital for delights even more glorious.

They took their way to the Imperial Hunting Ground, forty days' journey north of Ta Tu, outside the Great Wall. Here all sorts of large game, wild boar, stags and even tigers and bears, were sent from other parts of the country. And here hunting leopards, lynxes and specially trained tigers were used to catch this and other game, while eagles were let loose on wolves, foxes, deer and wild goats.

For beating and running the quarry, there were also mastiffs, in charge of two particular huntsmen, each of whom controlled a company of many thousand men and packs numbering hundreds of hounds.

Besides these, Kubilai, and his courtiers employed ten thousand falconers and kept five hundred gerfalcons, with innumerable other hawks, to fly at water-fowl.

All these men, animals and birds were distributed over the whole immense area of the Hunting Ground.

The ten thousand falconers were called Watchers, and were posted in couples and supplied with whistles and hoods to call in and hold the hawks. Every hawk had a label attached to its leg, showing to whom it belonged. But in case these labels should be lost or anything else found could not be immediately identified and claimed, there was a

Keeper of Lost Property whose camp was pitched, with banner displayed, on an eminence.

Kubilai now suffered from gout, so, instead of riding like other Mongols, he was carried northward in a large wooden litter, lined inside with plates of beaten gold and hooded with tiger skins. Within his litter he kept a dozen hawks, and he was attended by special courtiers, whose duty it was to indicate the moment when he should let fly at cranes or other wild fowl. As they gave the word, the top of the litter was removed, and the Great Khan could thus watch the sport at his ease.

His main camp was eventually pitched at a place called Cachar Modun, situated immediately north of the eastern portion of the Great Wall. Here various luxurious tents were set apart for Imperial use, and the number of the others for his ladies, his courtiers, his huntsmen and their entire families, made of the place a large and lively city.

For three happy months, the time was spent in hawking among the lakes and rivers of this area and in hunting across the plains. Within twenty days' journey round the camp, no people of the country were allowed to keep hawks or hounds, and all game was strictly preserved from March to October.

At the end of May, it was his custom to return to Ta Tu for three days, and then to go to Shang Tu for June, July and August, with intervals for further hunting in that vicinity.

Thus he passed the year and though, as time proceeded, Marco remained busy with his studies and Niccolo and Maffeo found plenty of opportunities to increase their knowledge of trade, undoubtedly three Venetian gentlemen were not behind in appreciating the finest sport in the world.

CHAPTER XVI

At the same time, the Polos' interest in their friend Bayan led them to pay attention to all accounts of the Sung Empire, where he was now engaged, and all reports of his present campaign south of the Yangtse river.

They heard first that the whole culture of Manzi, a culture which even the northern Chinese allowed to be supreme, centred in its marvellous capital, Lin-gnan Fu.

It was called, they were told, the City of Heaven and, when Niccolo and Maffeo visited it in later years, they found that it was indeed the finest and largest city in the world.

Its complete form was that of an hour-glass, and its circuit was thirty miles. Also it reminded them of their own Venice, for it was intersected by canals. But there the comparison stopped, for these canals, fed by a large river, unlike what they knew, were crossed by innumerable highly arched and exquisitely carved bridges of stone and marble.

The river entered a lake within the compass of the city on its western side, and issued thence again to flow through an artificial estuary to the eastern sea. The wall raised by that work protected the city from the tide, which rose here in a great bore, at furious speed, and with a noise like thunder. The streets and all the adjacent highways of Lin-gnan Fu were paved with stone or brick and, below the main thoroughfare, which was smooth and straight and very wide, vaulted drains, overlaid with gravel, conveyed rain water to the canals.

There were hospitals in the city, for the care of the sick and the infirm, and institutions where the blind, in particular, were housed, fed and taught the trade of basket weaving.

There were no less than three thousand public baths, supplying heated water from springs for the use of the poor; each bath was large enough to contain a hundred persons, and they were used daily by the people before they ate.

The houses were mostly built of wood, but many had high stone towers for the storage of valuables, in case of fire. Watchmen constantly patrolled the streets, marking the passing hours by beating a metal basin with a wooden stick and keeping a look out for any one crippled or in need of assistance, or for any conflagration. On an eminence in the city the risk of fire was further safeguarded by a tower, containing an alarum, which could be sounded night or day.

There were no beggars in Lin-gnan Fu. All the people were fair and comely and all, except labourers, were clothed in the softest silks.

As in Venice, there were many trade guilds of various crafts, but the guilds of Venice, with all their wealth, were insignificant beside these, each one of which had twelve thousand houses for its workmen. The masters of the guilds lived like noblemen, and their wives were like fairy princesses.

All children born in the capital were registered, so that their horoscopes might be read by the astrologers, and over the doorway of every house the inmates were enumerated by name, and even the animals in their possession were noted. The hostels for travellers especially conformed to this rule, and their owners were obliged to register the dates of all arrivals and departures.

Near the great sea wall, ten principal markets fronted the beautiful main street, covering a vast square area, and, behind the markets, warehouses of stone were available for the storage of all the commodities that were brought here by native or foreign merchants, and particularly by the Arab traders, who came to the port of Kan-p'u at the mouth of the estuary.

In the markets were every kind of meat, game, poultry and fish; vegetables of all varieties and luscious fruits, such as peaches, apricots and pears of phenomenal size;

grains from the surrounding country, and spices from overseas.

And the market places were surrounded by lofty buildings, on the ground floor of which shops displayed their wares of art treasures, precious stones and silk.

In this shopping centre, as in other cities of later date, and as in the Piazetta of Venice, light but lovely ladies, unconfined to a particular quarter, were carried in palanquins and sedan chairs, from which they occasionally descended to totter a short distance on their tiny bound feet. So famous were these courtesans for their wit as much as for their beauty and their wealth, that they were considered to be the chief attraction of the City of Heaven, which was also well named " the melting-pot for money."

The morals of the people, however, were not generally loose. Nowhere was the chastity of women more respected ; nowhere was there greater integrity, combined with orderliness and gracious manners.

Any rude show of force was for them mere barbarism. They never learned the use of arms and owned no horses, but walked or rode through their glowing streets and over their lovely bridges in covered palanquins, borne by cheerful carriers.

Their hospitality was proverbial, and one of their chief recreations was a pleasure party on the Western Lake.

This glorious sheet of water, nine miles in circumference, was surrounded with temples, pagodas and the palaces of aristocrats in enchanting gardens. It was girdled with tree-planted causeways, and on its bosom floated three islands, like jewels, where, in lacquered and gilded pavilions, opportunities for the richest possible entertainment was afforded.

Here the people resorted in painted barges, to hold marriage feasts and dinner parties, at which the choicest food and wine, as well as table-cloths, napkins, silver plate and bouquets of fresh flowers, were provided, at a period when such amenities were hardly known in Western countries. The poetic fantasy of their luxury was further shown by the names given to everything they enjoyed.

At the Tea House of Pure Delight, near the Lake Heart Pavilion, Precious Thunder tea was sold and wine of Snow Bubbles and Apricot Blossom.

In the midst of all this splendour was the palace of the Sung Emperor, and, if the city itself was a paradise, no words can describe the royal demesne. The Gate of the Adoration of Heaven led into the Imperial Street, bordered with the stately buildings of temples, convents and government offices, and another great gateway, called " Harmony and Tranquillity," led past a hostel for foreigners, through a battlemented wall, into " the finest and most delectable gardens on earth." Here fountains played and fish swam in lovely pools ; here fruit trees grew and shrines of marble contained the figures of Buddhist saints in enamel and gold ; here red and fallow deer, pheasants and hares were preserved ; here the air was always mild and every one was happy. And here was the glorious abode of the Emperor, with its twenty spacious halls, entirely painted in gold leaf with the figures of departed kings, birds and beasts ; with its one thousand lofty rooms, equally adorned ; with its cloisters and columned porticoes, giving on to the prospect of the Western Lake.

A multitude of fair women had served the Emperor Tu-t'song and his Empress, and no man had been permitted there. On summer mornings, Tu-t'song had sallied forth with a bevy of maidens to course the game in his park. When tired, they had climbed to the leafy groves that overhung the lake, and there the charming huntresses had discarded their silken robes, and had come forth, naked and unashamed, to swim and frolic in the water, while the Emperor had watched them. Sometimes they had all picnicked on the slopes of " Phœnix Hill," or in the woods of " Moon Cliff," or, in palanquins, they had gone out to visit the " Cloud Climbing Grotto " or the " Celestial Flower Convent."

No disturbing fears had ever marred the blissful serenity of their lives. Was not the realm safe in the keeping of Kia-se-tao, the Minister of State, that able man of letters ? Had not he said that rumours of wars were false,

and did not he entirely approve and practise the precept that man's first duty was to please and be pleased?

So Tu-t'song had believed. And so had believed all the prosperous and care-free people of the City of Heaven; all the maiden huntresses of the palace, the Dowager and the reigning Empresses, the Imperial children and all the nobles and officials that thronged the court.

Till on a summer day, Tu-t'song had suddenly left his earthly paradise for one that he could hardly have appreciated more.

And Kia-se-tao, faced by the Mongol peril, had instantly decided that it would be better for himself that the second son of the Imperial family, a child of four years old, rather than the eldest son, should succeed to the throne.

Who could judge so wisely as Kia-se-tao, that man of unquestionable taste? The little boy had become Son of Heaven, ruler of the Sung Empire, under the name of Kong-tsong. But because his age was tender, and even Heaven is discriminating, his grandmother, the Dowager Empress, Siei-hsi, a woman still young and beautiful enough to fill the eye of Kia-se-tao, had been appointed Regent.

When Bayan, during his first campaign against Manzi, defeated the great Chinese fleet of Kia-se-tao on the Yangtse river, Kia-se-tao could no longer conceal his own incompetence and the Empress Regent deprived him of office.

It was not enough. Public hatred of that man of letters was so general that he could not prevent true reports of his crimes from reaching the Imperial ear. While Bayan was recalled and the war went forward in the central provinces, ten principal accusations were brought against Kia-se-tao, all demanding his punishment by death. But Siei-hsi, the still beautiful Dowager, whom Kia-se-tao had himself appointed, hesitated to pronounce his just doom.

Instead she decided that his property should be confiscated, and that he should be banished for life to the province of Fu-kien, farther south. A court official

volunteered to conduct the disgraced Minister to the place of exile and to protect him on the way from the fury of the people.

Siei-hsi agreed to the offer, not knowing that this official's father had suffered from the intrigues of Kia-se-tao.

They started on the journey from Lin-gnan Fu, the officer, Tsui-li, riding in a palanquin carried by bearers at the head of his escort and the wretched Kia-se-tao following in a sedan chair.

So long as they passed through the city Kia-se-tao hid himself in his covered chair, but afterwards, as he was a man incapable of honesty even to himself, he adopted the pose of a martyred philosopher, who could not be shamed, and sat well forward with a book of the classics open on his knees. At last they reached the open country, where there were few to be impressed, and Kia-se-tao exchanged his heavy volume for a book of light verse.

His chair was suddenly stopped, the door opened, and the order given him to descend. Surprised and angry, he was obliged to obey, and was then told that the chair carriers refused to go farther, and that he must therefore walk. He was hustled into the midst of the escort, and, girding his robe about him, he was forced to march with these men—he who was already old and stout and had hardly ever set foot to the ground.

He lamented aloud ; he stigmatised the order of Tsui-li as " base, filthy and un-officer-like conduct." But insults and coarse laughter were his only answers. In a little while his soft felt-soled boots were in rags, and he was too footsore and weary for speech.

When they reached a hostelry, he fell on the floor of the mean room assigned to him and lay there all night, for there was no bed. Next morning, after an insufficient meal, he was told he must march again. He refused with oaths, and found his arms tied and a halter put about his neck and attached to the front pole of the officer's palanquin. Unless he chose to be dragged on his face, he had to walk, though his feet bled and his heart was bursting.

And as he walked the officer, comfortably seated, tormented him further with mock respect, saying, "Honourable chariot, let us chat about cold and heat," or "Pillar of the State, how true is the couplet:

> "Friends abound in times of wine and good dinners;
> But not one is to be found in days of adversity and want"!

"May your hands and feet rot!" groaned Kia-se-tao. "May you die by the roadside!"

"How fierce we grow when far from war!" said Tsui-li. "While you consorted with flowers and willows, patriots died. Now, though the sword be sharp, it will not wound the innocent."

When Kia-se-tao was ready to faint, he was allowed to rest on a grassy bank, where Tsui-li, descending from the palanquin, joined him and pretended to defer to his literary knowledge and taste.

"Did not Laotze say 'Misfortune and prosperity have no door: they are evoked by men themselves'? What, sir, is your opinion?"

"The correct mind," retorted Kia-se-tao, falling into the trap, "does not fear the corrupt or the depraved."

"How true!" said Tsui-li; "and genuine gold dreads not the fire. Also the land crab that knows how to die needs no stabbing."

"Why should you believe evil against me?" said Kia-se-tao.

"If you don't want a thing to be known and believed, you must not do it," said Tsui-li.

"Better for me to die than to live," sighed his victim.

"Assuredly," agreed Tsui-li; "but do not forget that, though the leopard when he dies leaves his skin, a man leaves also his reputation."

Thus he was tortured from day to day, till his strength left him and he could only totter for a mile at a time. But time was no object to Tsui-li, who thought ever of his own father's unmerited disgrace and death.

The sole comfort left to Kia-se-tao was the belief that the officer still considered his literary taste. For although

Tsui-li continually gibed him, the fact that he did so in proverbs and classical allusions proved his recognition of an educated mind. To impose this reputation to the last, even on his tormentor, was therefore a solace, and when no eye was upon him Kia-se-tao, still wearing his shell-rimmed spectacles, could seek relief in the book of light verses, which he had continued to hide in the sleeve of his robe.

At last, however, the day came when they approached the province of Fu-kien, and Kia-se-tao was so wearied and spent that, after a short halt by the roadside, he felt incapable of moving another step. He was a pitiful object. Not only were his garments dust begrimed and torn, not only were his feet, wrapped now in rags, swollen as though with gout, but his nerves, frayed by perpetual verbal torment, made him ready to weep. He could no longer dwell on the lascivious pleasures of the past. He could no longer think of wine or women, intrigue, gluttony or vice. All he desired was rest.

"O honourable sir!" he whined, "do not chide me further, for I cannot move."

"I will chide you not only with words but with blows," roared Tsui-li, kicking him. "Rise, brute, whom I flatter with that name, for what brute would betray and destroy his own kind?"

"Mercy!" moaned Kia-se-tao.

"Why should I show mercy to one who has sold his country? Traitor, I would you had ten thousand lives that I might take each one slowly. Coward, if you like not my treatment, you might have freed yourself in death long since."

"I cannot live and to die I am afraid," said Kia-se-tao. "Yet age and infirmity should command some pity, and the temperament of a man of letters should ensure respect."

Tsui-li pulled him violently to his feet, and the book of verses dropped from Kia-se-tao's sleeve and fell open at a picture. Kia-se-tao tried to retrieve his treasure, but stumbled to his knees in the act and saw it in his enemy's hands.

The picture was exquisite and distinctly obscene.

Tsui-li regarded it with an expression of horror and contempt.

"So this is the food of your mind, O patron of art and letters!" he said. "Foul mind, your patent errors might have been excused, but your pretensions to taste, never! Depraved and abominable, to murder the innocent is known as your propensity, but to countenance the smirching of Truth is a crime that can only be judged in hell!"

So saying, he drew from his belt a sharp knife and cut the throat of Kia-se-tao from ear to ear.

The body of Kia-se-tao was left on the spot. The picture from the book of verses was attached to a sheet of paper and fastened on his chest. On the paper was written: "I was Kia-se-tao, a Man of Letters, and this was what I admired."

No Chinese gave that defamed body decent burial, for in the Far East the moral degradation of art is the unforgivable sin.

CHAPTER XVII

BAYAN advanced with a large army on Lin-gnan Fu, stopping only to attack the city of Chang-chau. Here he employed auxiliary Christian troops of the Alan tribe from the Caucasus, and, when the city fell, all the inhabitants were at first spared.

The Alans, however, celebrated their victory by drinking not wisely but too well. Night fell, and they lay down in a stupor of intoxication, having done no harm, but having rejoiced according to their nature.

Then the Chinese rose up and massacred every one of those Alan soldiers. And, in revenge, Bayan, usually humane and chivalrous, left not a soul alive in Chang-chau.

News of this slaughter reached the Sung capital, and, while a call to arms for every man over fifteen years of age was issued, envoys offering complete submission were sent to Bayan. He refused to listen, for by now he had had too much experience of Sung treachery.

He went on through Soo-chow, the Paris of China, the great city of the silk trade, situated in one of the most fertile and wealthy districts of the country. There was no resistance here, for the people were anything rather than warriors, and the lovely place, with its temples, libraries, parks and cedar groves, escaped destruction.

At last the Empress Regent and all her advisers realised that this was the end. He of the Hundred Eyes, whose coming it had been foretold would mean the ruin of the Sung dynasty, was now near. Yet Siei-hsi would not despair, for still she possessed beauty, that feminine weapon, which only Time can conquer. The elder and younger half-brothers of the child Emperor (children of another

mother) were hastily sent off by sea to the southern provinces, where, for the time being, they would be safe.

Siei-hsi was pressed to escape also with the Imperial boy and his mother, but she answered : " We shall remain and see whether this Bayan cannot be abashed by the glories of the Son of Heaven and his City."

She sent orders to all provincial governors to submit at once to the Mongols, and herself dispatched the Great Seal of the Empire to Bayan.

He arrived at the head of his whole staff, a splendid cavalcade, preceded by his standard and drums, and made his entry into the capital, without resistance.

It was the first time that mounted warriors had been seen in the magnificent paved streets of Lin-gnan Fu. The people were curious, but, as ever, polite and circumspect, and Bayan, taking up his residence, gave them no cause for offence. Troops were stationed in the city to keep order, and all the registers, historical memoirs and maps of each government archive were seized and placed under seal.

Meanwhile, within the lovely palace, where two Chinese dignitaries were appointed to keep watch, the Empress Regent and the young Emperor sat enthroned, surrounded by all the princes and princesses, and presenting such a spectacle of civilisation in its extreme form that any Mongol must have been shamed to impose upon it his rude force.

Siei-hsi, in her robes of cloth of gold, with a head-dress of pearls, hanging in long strings, was like some divine figure in a shrine, exquisite and unassailable.

The child Emperor, beside her, was also like a sacred image, so young and fair that his appearance must have touched the stoniest heart, and withal so old in culture and so solemn that no one could have denied him his title. The court was filled with sweet odours and the sounds of soft music. An atmosphere of peace, plenty and perfection, potent enough to quell any impertinent demand, any suggestion of war, ruled the place.

They sat and they waited for the intrusion of Bayan.

He did not intrude.

A message was at last sent inviting his presence.

Still he did not come.

Another message told him that he would be welcome.

He answered with polished courtesy, " Sensible as I am of the compliment paid to me, my ignorance of the proper ceremonies to observe at court must prevent my acceptance."

The great soldier could not be trapped in any mistake. He left the city the next day and waited outside, till the Empress Regent and her family consented to be escorted to the capital of Kubilai Khan.

The family of the Sung came forth with all their wealth, in number great, in splendour still marvellous. All rode in palanquins of gold, studded with precious stones and curtained with the finest tissues. Their baggage was carried in innumerable carts. But heavy as was their property, it was not so heavy as the heart of Siei-hsi.

The dolorous journey northwards began. The prisoners were treated with the utmost respect and consideration, and for some of them, perhaps, for the six-year-old Emperor and for a little princess aged seven, who was his companion, this captivity was rather release from a gilded cage, this downfall was rather the first step to freedom.

North of the Yangtse river, as they passed through the city of Kwa-chau, a desperate attempt was made by the Chinese to recapture the Emperor. The Mongol troops were attacked by a forlorn hope of patriots, but the effort failed and Siei-hsi abandoned herself to despair.

Suddenly she was old and no longer beautiful. And her head-dress of pendant pearls matched the tears that trickled in slow drops down her face.

At long last they came to Shang Tu, where, for the season was summer, Kubilai Khan was now in residence. But, despite the beauty of the place, almost to be compared to their own gracious Lin-gnan Fu, they were among strangers, whose manners and customs were unknown to them.

What would be their reception at the hands of the

Mongol usurper, Kubilai Khan? Even if, like his Minister, General Bayan, he could not be considered a barbarian, surely he and all his people must evince intolerable pride over this final triumph.

Noisy crowds watched the sad procession through the streets of Shang Tu. For the family of the Sung, hidden in their palanquins, it was an hour of terror and of dismay. They found comparative peace directly they entered the Imperial demesne. Had they not been beyond hope, the dignity of their surroundings might have brought some comfort. Then they came to the great square before the palace, and were invited to alight and to enter that magnificent marble building. Siei-hsi gathered round her the children, their mothers, all the late princes and princesses. The ladies, with their compressed feet, tottered up the steps. The erstwhile Son of Heaven, holding by the hand his little girl friend, walked between his grandmother and his mother.

The Polos, standing amid a throng of courtiers and ladies at the head of the steps, watched that arrival. Suddenly the throng parted to make way for Kubilai's first and favourite wife, the Empress Jambui, who came forth from the palace alone.

Time had not dimmed the beauty of this gentle lady, and no triumph could spoil her tender nature. She advanced with her hands outstretched in greeting and tears shone in her eyes. When she saw the two children, she stooped and put her arms around them both.

"Little ones," she said, "this shall be your home. There is love waiting for you."

She handed them to the care of her attendants and turned to Siei-hsi and the widow of Tu-t'song.

"Honourable ladies, forgive me if the forms prescribed by ceremony are wanting in my welcome. The only wish of my heart is that you should believe in my good faith and sympathy."

"Madam," answered Siei-hsi, with stiff painted lips, "it is impossible to think that you would mock us in our present plight."

"How could I mock," said Jambui, "when I foresee that the Yuen dynasty will some day end like the Sung?"

At that moment, a little maiden of the Mongol court, hitherto unnoticed by the Polos, approached the Chinese children. Marco observed her now, and heard her words as first she bowed before the small boy.

"Sire, I give you ten thousand happy greetings. My name is Kokachin. I am a princess of the Bayaut tribe, and I will always pray for your good health." Then she faced the girl and went on. with all the merry abandon of a child. "O most sweet lady! will you play with me? We are surely of the same age. Are you tired with your long journey? Come with me; I will be your sister and love you dearly!"

Marco smiled as he saw the three children go off together.

"Bravo, little Kokachin," he thought. "You were just what was needed to make us all feel happier."

The formal reception of the Sung family by Kubilai himself was no less kind, and, that they might not be shamed by the distribution of their forfeited treasure at Shang Tu, it was sent direct to Ta Tu. Though the young Emperor was reduced to be a prince of the third rank and his mother and grandmother lost their titles, they continued to live at the City of Peace as honoured guests for many years. The little princess remained always with her new found friend Kokachin, and both these maidens were brought up at Kubilai's court. The Polos therefore often saw the whole family, but their personal interests prevented any particular attention to the Imperial household and, as the children were not in evidence, Marco soon forgot Kokachin and her pretty welcome.

Ultimately, however, he heard more of the end of the Sung dynasty.

Manzi was still unconquered, for the elder of the late Emperor's two half-brothers, a boy of nine, who had been sent away from Lin-gnan Fu by sea, was proclaimed Son of Heaven in a southern province, under the name of

Y-wang. Immediately, as though in answer to a trumpet call, patriots flocked around him from all parts of the country, and notably from that contingent which had attempted the forlorn hope of rescue as the family had travelled northwards.

From their late Empress Regent they received the urgent command to desist. They disregarded it.

From Kubilai they received a generous offer of peace. They disdained it.

In every place, as before, they preferred death to surrender.

But as the Mongol army, still in the south, gradually overcame them, it was considered advisable to remove the new Emperor, and his younger brother, farther south to the famous port of Zayton, the modern Huan-chau, not far from Amoy.

There the Sung party was so injudicious as to seize private vessels belonging to the Chinese governor of the city, who, enraged by the action, gave up the place to the Mongols. The Imperial ships fled along the coast till they neared what is now Hongkong. Then, finding no port open to them where they could shelter, the commanders offered half-hearted submission to Kubilai, and the whole province of Kwan-tung followed their example.

At this point, Bayan, whose genius had directed the Mongol arms, was sent once more against Kaidu in the north, and, directly his influence was removed, the south, to a man, rose again.

But Kubilai sent fresh forces and a fleet to attack the Sung squadron. Threatened by land and water, Canton was forced to surrender, and the Son of Heaven, finding again no harbourage, wandered in his ship over the wide sea, till on a desert island, at last, Death closed his tired eyes.

This should have been the end, but it was not. Where all were ready to give in, one Chinese officer, called Liu-sin-fu, refused.

"The Son of Heaven has joined his ancestors," they told him. "How can we do more?"

"The Son of Heaven leaves his younger brother to rule in his stead," retorted Liu-sin-fu. "While an heir remains, how can we abandon him?"

He roused the others, and the little boy was promptly enthroned upon a mound of earth and proclaimed Emperor, by the name of Ti-ping.

Ti-ping, the last southern Son of Heaven, was not amused. He had never learned, like Western children, that a desert island might appeal to the imagination. No doubt the reality was more bleak than any fancy, and to rule a desert island or the waves surrounding it requires freedom for enjoyment, whereas the sacred person of Ti-ping was by no means free.

He was hidden amid such luxury as could be commanded, in the cabin of a large junk, and he seldom even saw the light of day. But though he did not know it, from that cabin the light of his presence shone out like a beacon to attract loyalty.

A large Chinese fleet gathered together and retired to the river estuary of the Gulf of Canton, their final refuge. On land, a new army of patriots actually recaptured Canton, but could not keep it or prevail against the Mongols, who, having disposed of them, embarked in ships and followed the Chinese fleet, as far as the mouth of the straits.

On an island, within the estuary, Chinese troops were entrenched, and the position of their junks seemed fairly secure, as the water inland was too shallow for any onslaught from the north. The Mongols, however, sent forward light boats filled with straw, soaked in oil and ignited, intending by this means to set fire to the great wooden junks.

From the window of his cabin, Ti-ping, the Son of Heaven, saw these blazing craft approach and clapped his little hands in glee. That glow of fire, reflected in the dark water, was the most glorious thing he had ever seen. But the lovely fire faded, as it came alongside ships prepared beforehand with thick coatings of wet mud, which dripped from their hulls and from their spars.

"Alas!" cried Ti-ping, "the pretty fire dragons, swimming on the water, are all quenched and drowned!"

Now, a strange and fearful tumult reached his ears—shouts, shrieks and groans, the rattle of cables drawn on board, running footsteps near at hand and, in the distance, the clash of arms from every side.

From his window, Ti-ping could see nothing interesting. A white sea fog lay on the water. He felt cold, desolate and afraid. He was alone. He ran to the door of the cabin and found it locked. He called and there was none to hear him in that clamour. He wept and there was none to comfort him. Presently he found a porcelain bowl filled with peaches. He ate them all, for he was hungry. Then, in spite of the continued noise, he slept.

When he woke it was completely dark, but there was no peace in the night. He cowered in his robes of yellow silk against the cushions on which he lay and whimpered. Failing human company, he longed for the company of his ancestors. They, who belonged to that dim delicious time when he had played in the palace garden of Lingnan Fu, when all the world was reasonable and at peace, would surely now welcome this sad little Son of Heaven.

Almost he could feel that they were near him again now. The sense of their presence consoled him. The ship was surely moving. Perhaps—oh! happy thought—perhaps he was to be taken home at last to his dear city. The hours passed while he dreamed thus. It was dawn, and the terrible noises seemed to be less.

The door of the cabin opened, and Ti-ping saw his friend, the officer Liu-sin-fu, a gentleman whom he liked, because, though usually stern and a stickler for etiquette, he believed that Liu-sin-fu loved him. Liu-sin-fu came now and knelt before the Son of Heaven. His face was pale and ravaged, and his clothing dishevelled, but his voice was firm as he said:

"Sire, all is not yet lost. I am with you, and I will never leave you."

"Why have I been left alone so long?" said the Son

of Heaven. "I liked the fire dragons, but I liked not the great noise."

"We were attacked from north and south, Sire," said Liu-sin-fu. "We have fought desperately throughout the day. Now, with sixteen ships, we are making a dash for the sea. We near the mouth of the straits now. If Heaven favours us, we may soon escape."

"Then shall we return to my capital?" said Ti-ping.

As he spoke, there was renewed and terrible clamour from above.

Liu-sin-fu turned and rushed from the cabin. The lip of the Son of Heaven trembled again. His last question had not been answered. His faithful friend had not even inquired after his comfort. And he was once more feeling hungry and cold. Surely Liu-sin-fu had forgotten his good manners.

After he had waited some time, the officer reappeared. His bearing was more dignified than before. He came swiftly to the Son of Heaven and prostrated himself.

"A proper act," thought Ti-ping, considering his late offence.

"Rise," said the Son of Heaven graciously. "You are forgiven."

Liu-sin-fu lifted his head and gazed at his Emperor.

"Sire," he said, "this is the end. The mouth of the strait is barred by a line of enemy barges lashed together. Have I your Imperial pardon for everything past, present, and to come?"

"You have," said the Son of Heaven. "I am tired. I want to go home to Lin-gnan Fu. I wish to get off this ship and join my lady mother."

Liu-sin-fu departed from propriety so far as to put his arms round the Son of Heaven and hold that little body to his breast.

"Heaven is before us, Sire," he said.

"The City of Heaven?" said Ti-ping.

"The eternal city, Sire."

"That is well," said Ti-ping. "Let us go there at once."

" Sire, the way is still difficult. Will you go as a conqueror, breathing vengeance against the enemy ? "

" Assuredly," said Ti-ping. " May all my enemies perish ! "

" Then as a conqueror you shall ride, Sire. Here there is no chair to carry you, but in other countries conquerors ride on horseback."

" Where is the horse ? " cried Ti-ping, with a happy laugh.

" Sire, I shall be your horse. Mount on my back, and lock your arms round my neck."

Ti-ping obeyed, but when he was mounted he said, " Stay, I should carry my Imperial seal."

Liu-sin-fu gave the seal into his hand, and carried him a few steps forward.

" Go on, good horse ! " shouted the Son of Heaven, in delight. " Go quickly ! This pleases me."

And the good horse trotted round the cabin and shook his head and kicked with his feet, till the Son of Heaven squealed with joy.

" Now," said Liu-sin-fu, " we put away frivolity and think only of hatred. Your friends await your presence, Sire, on deck, and your enemies shall meet our souls hereafter."

" On, on, good horse ! " cried Ti-ping. " On to the City of Heaven ! "

They came on to the deck, where all the officers and men stood in a double line waiting to receive their Emperor. As he appeared, riding in triumph, they prostrated themselves.

The morning was still young and the sky was flushed with rose colour. Through the pearly air sea birds flew and called. The Imperial vessel lay at the centre of a line of sixteen splendid junks. Behind them was the shadow of a dark coast, and before them the shadow, like another coast, of low-lying enemy barges.

" Where is the City of Heaven ? " said the Emperor.

" We go to find it," answered Liu-sin-fu. " Let all who hear follow ! "

So saying, with the Son of Heaven still on his back, he vaulted over the bulwark of the ship into the opalescent sea.

When, among innumerable corpses washed on shore, the body of the last Emperor of the Sung was found, it was identified by the Imperial seal, still clutched in his little hand. He, the final ruler of a dynasty that had reigned for over three centuries, had died in the first hour of pure joy that he had ever known.

CHAPTER XVIII

Two years after the arrival of the Sung family at Shang Tu, Marco Polo showed himself so fit for responsibility, that Kubilai decided to send him on a mission to the west and south-west of China. He was to report on the condition of the provinces of Shan-si, Shen-si and Ssu-chuan, and further on the wild countries of eastern Tibet and Yun-nan, with particular reference to those aboriginal tribes, with whom Kubilai had long ago come in contact.

Never before had a European been thus employed and, though many have travelled through China since, never has one thus served a Chinese Emperor. There was no lack of wise men, both natives and foreigners of western and central Asia, at Kubilai's court. Among them all, one young Venetian gentleman was singled out as worthy to conduct the mission.

He travelled now in as much ease as any Chinese official could have commanded, across rivers, plains and mountains, by that great military road which Kubilai had trod before, through part of Tibet and on through Yun-nan to the city of Tali, which Kubilai had won by parading his banners.

All the way, Marco was gathering new and marvellous impressions and noting everything he saw and heard with the most careful detail. And as he never recorded any difficulties, it must be presumed that his own remarkable personality won all hearts and saved all trouble.

At Tali he did not stay, but went on westward into the wild and inaccessible country of Yung-chang above the Salween river valley, where he found a curious tribe, who covered their teeth with plates of gold and tattoed their bodies. A prosperous, indolent and ignorant race, they were at war with the Burmese, but dared not cross the hot

fever valley that divided them from their enemies, for fear of death or in the belief that its baneful influence would carry so far as to make their wives unfaithful.

Yet, in this unhealthy country, Marco now heard that a Mongol army had, a year previously, gained a signal victory against the Burmese. Long ago, Kubilai had sent ambassadors to the King of Mien, whose realm comprised upper and lower Burma and several Shan states. But this King, who was the last to rule the whole territory, had refused to receive the Mongol ambassadors. Consequently, the advance posts of Kubilai's Empire had skirmished with Burmese troops and, the year before Marco arrived, a Mongol general called Nasr ed din, who was the governor of Tali, had captured a Burmese stronghold, but failed to break through the thick veil of principalities and states between Yun-nan and Burma proper.

The King of Burma then sent a large army against the Mongols. He had two thousand elephants, each carrying twelve to sixteen men in their huge, castellated howdahs, and sixty thousand troops of horse and foot. To meet this great force, Nasr ed din had only twelve thousand horsemen, but all of them were seasoned Mongol warriors.

The two armies met in an open plain fringed by a forest. The Burmese elephants advanced in battle array, and the Mongol horses, having never before seen anything so terrible, took fright. With the utmost coolness and discipline, their riders dismounted and tied the snorting and panic-stricken horses to the trees of the forest, where they were sheltered. Then the Mongols took their bows and arrows and, from a steady phalanx, poured out such a hail of shafts, that the elephants turned tail and fled. With loud trumpetings, like ungovernable monsters, they plunged into the forest, dashing their howdahs against the trees and bursting their harness.

"To horse and pursue them!" shouted the brave Nasr ed din.

And the Mongol army mounted again and rushed after the disorganised host.

"What happened then?" inquired Marco Polo.

" Then," went on his informant, " might you have seen swashing blows dealt and taken from sword and mace; then might you have seen knights and horses and men-at-arms go down; then might you have seen arms and hands and legs and heads hewn off; and besides the dead that fell, many a wounded man that never rose again for the sore press there was. The din and uproar were so great from this side and from that, that God might have thundered and no man would have heard it!"

A description which pleased Marco so well, that he noted it exactly in his book to report to Kubilai, and never afterwards forgot it.

After thus routing the Burmese, the Mongols returned to the forest and, with the help of certain prisoners they had taken, they captured two hundred elephants, which were then sent to the Great Khan. The elephants were probably on their slow way to Ta Tu now. Kubilai was to value them highly and subsequently he always used them, both for sport, to carry his palanquin, and for display, to parade before him at the capital for his birthday and New Year festivals.

In later years, several other expeditions were sent against Burma, but when finally the Mongol power waned, Burma remained for generations independent.

Marco continued his journey through Burma. He visited its capital, Pagan on the Irawadi, and saw there its gold and silver pagodas, shining in the sunlight and sounding their fairy bells in every breeze that passed. He went through the district between the Salween and Irawadi rivers, known as the Kingdom of Eight Hundred Wives, because the King of Burma was said to keep that establishment. And thence travelling northwards along the western frontier of Kwei-chou province, among aboriginal tribesmen, he gradually retraced his route and went back to Shang Tu.

During this great journey and particularly in the provinces of Shan-si and Shen-si, now ruled by Kubilai's third son, Mangalai, Marco had come across many

Mohammedan merchants : Persians, Turks and Arabs, who had married Chinese wives and had settled in the country. He did not love these aliens, for he considered, with insufficient experience, that the Saracen was the natural enemy of the orthodox Christian. But undoubtedly they were keen traders besides ardent fighters, both by disposition and faith.

When Marco had made his report to Kubilai at Shang Tu, he went to Ta Tu, where by now Niccolo and Maffeo were lodged in a house of their own and engaged in business. From them he heard that the Saracens also swarmed in this city, and that they were extremely overbearing, since they were under the special protection of Kubilai's Minister of Finance, the Persian, Achmath. This man had received his high appointment through the influence of the Empress Jambui, who wished to reward him for previous service and was incapable of suspecting evil.

Achmath, beneath a plausible manner, was, however, a perfect egotist. He oppressed the poor, amassed a huge fortune for himself by blackmail, and, in his private life, followed the lurid example of the Prophet's later years in regard to women. No female was safe with him, and he procured appointments in exchange for any who pleased him. No person of whatever rank dared cross him, and not even the favoured Polos could stand against the pride of the Mohammedans, who looked to him as their patron. His twenty-five sons, to whom high posts were assigned, conducted at Ta Tu an official reign of terror, for, if any one opposed them, he was reported to the Khan as guilty of treason, a crime deserving and earning execution.

" But why," said Marco, when he heard this, " do not others whom the great Khan trusts tell him the truth ? Kubilai is just and would welcome information."

" You have been long away, so how should you understand ? " answered Niccolo. " Actually a provincial governor, high in the Khan's favour, did report Achmath, who in return accused the man of embezzlement. On this account, a commission was appointed and the governor was found innocent. The finding was overruled by the Saracen, who sent another commission of his own creatures.

And this second commission tried and executed the governor."

"It is past belief," said Marco. "What can be the Minister's power over Kubilai?"

"He knows that the Chinese do not love him because he is a Mongol," said Maffeo, "and he cannot believe that the Chinese love Achmath still less. Also his sons are no comfort to the Khan. The Prince Ching-kin, who is perhaps the best of them, but has an ungovernable temper, is alive to the iniquities of the Minister, and one day struck him on the face with his bow and laid the Saracen's cheek open. When Kubilai saw the wound and asked the reason of it, Achmath answered that it was due to the kick of a horse."

"Whereupon," said Niccolo, laughing, "I heard Prince Ching-kin say in scorn, 'Are you ashamed to tell who struck you?' And all the interest his honesty gained was a reprimand from his Imperial father, who had seen him pummel Achmath with his fists on another occasion."

"I cannot bear that the Khan should be so deceived," said Marco, with the impetuosity of his twenty-five years. "Sooner or later I will tell him the truth myself."

"Better late than early," said Niccolo. "Achmath has already two enemies more powerful than Prince Ching-kin, both Chinese officers. One of them, whose name is Chen-chu, is especially embittered, for that the Saracen has dishonoured certain ladies of his household."

"We are acquainted with Chen-chu," said Maffeo, "and also with his friend Wang-chu. They are good men and will not tolerate this scandal. But God alone knows what they will do."

They were soon to hear. One day a message arrived from Wang-chu, asking the three Polos to proceed at once from their private house to the Imperial palace and to stay there that night. No reason was given for the urgent invitation, and, supposing it to have been inspired by an order from Kubilai, they saw no cause to refuse. But when, as honoured guests, they were safe within the palace precincts, they learned the truth.

The two officers, Chen-chu and Wang-chu, received them in secret conclave.

" Gentlemen," said Wang-chu, as the spokesman, " we know that you are the friends of the Empire. We too are the friends of justice. But there is no justice except that of the people in Ta Tu at present. Ta Tu is ruled by a base foreign influence, which must be overset. For that reason, when our work within the palace is accomplished to-night, on a given signal, the people will rise and slay all men with black beards in the city."

Each of the Polos fingered his own beard in some dismay.

" You must know, honourable foreigners," said Chen-chu calmly, " that besides yourselves, who are under our protection here, all other men with black beards are of the same race and faith as the tyrant Achmath. The young Chinese do not grow hair upon their faces."

This simple distinction between loyalists and traitors, with only the exception in their favour, was all the Polos heard about the plot afoot. They could do nothing, except await events, with some sympathy and some fear. Marco, however, took care to see and hear all that transpired.

As night fell, the palace, where Chen-chu and Wang-chu waited in the great hall with some chosen followers, was brightly illuminated. When Marco asked the reason for this display, he was told that a message had been dispatched to inform Achmath that Prince Ching-kin had unexpectedly returned from Shang Tu and that the immediate attendance of the Minister was desired. At any moment now, in answer to the summons, Achmath would arrive. They waited in breathless suspense.

At last there was a stir in the outer court.

" He comes," whispered Chen-chu, standing in the doorway. " Make ready ! " And he drew his sword.

Wang-chu, standing at the right of the Imperial throne, hid his face in a fold of his mantle, and Chen-chu joined him with the sword concealed by his clothing.

The Minister's men-at-arms and a captain, who had

accompanied him from the gate, entered. They were followed by Achmath, a stout and malignant figure in his robes of office, haughtily resentful of the summons at night, from a prince whom he detested but dared not disobey. He waddled forward, between the double line of soldiers, and prostrated himself before the throne.

"Your servant is here, O most noble Prince!" he began, addressing himself to Wang-chu, "but surely——"

He spoke no more.

"Die, seducer of women!" shouted Chen-chu, and with one swift movement struck off the Minister's head with his sword.

Instantly there was turmoil. Wang-chu revealed his face with a cry of triumph. The men-at-arms rushed towards him. But, in the same moment, the captain of the guard, who had stayed near the entrance, called, "Treason!" and shot a well-aimed arrow which pierced Wang-chu's breast.

Marco Polo stayed to see nothing further. He slipped out of the palace unnoticed and, knowing that the plot had failed and that there could now be no danger for a bearded man in the city, he managed to escape from the Imperial precincts and to regain his father's house.

In a little while, he was on his way to Shang Tu. But well as he sped he could not reach the City of Peace before the runners, dispatched by the military authorities of Ta Tu to apprise Kubilai of the murder of his Minister. Nor could he gain the Great Khan's ear, before Kubilai had indignantly issued the order that Chen-chu should be executed and that Achmath's body should be buried with the highest honours.

At that, however, Marco was able to reveal what he knew, and as a witness of the event, he told Kubilai the whole story, and was believed where other ministers of the realm and even a prince of the blood royal had been doubted.

Hearing the report of this disinterested young man of twenty-five, Kubilai made for the first time the most stringent inquiries into the circumstances of Achmath's

life, and finding that his own rule had been tarnished by official injustice, he took the fierce revenge of a Mongol.

Achmath's lately interred body was dug up and cast out to be devoured by dogs, and some of his sons, who had profited most by his vices, were executed. All the property of the family was confiscated and the privileges of all Mohammedans were curtailed.

"The religion of these people is not worthy of that name," said Kubilai, "for it excuses every crime, yea, even murder itself, when committed on such as are not of their faith. They pretend that their doctrines are founded on the pure reformation of their Prophet. But it seems that only in his early life was he a man who had any perception of the principle Jên. And as that perception is wholly lacking in his followers, how can Islam survive?"

"The sect of the Saracens is indeed accursed," agreed the Polos gravely.

But in maintaining this opinion, shared by the majority of the Chinese, they doubtless never heard how Hassan el Kasim, a young Persian merchant of Ta Tu, found the Word to which Islam owes its life, in a garden.

Hassan el Kasim put up the shutters of the shop where he sold woollen carpets from Turkestan and silk prayer rugs from Khorassan, and went out in the street to take the evening air.

Trade had of late been bad and, though he was rich enough not to be immediately affected, he could not be indifferent to the fact that the trouble was due to the ill repute of his countrymen.

Personally he was honest, and had detested the character of the late Minister of Finance as much as any. But, nationally, he felt himself superior to all Chinese or Mongol idolaters.

His air was therefore at once melancholy and proud. Beneath the modesty of dress and demeanour that the Prophet enjoined, surged a heart fierce and disdainful.

His lips were curved in a sneer of disgust, as he saw infidels flocking to the door of an eating-house, where

doubtless they would defile themselves with the cooked flesh of unclean meat, their favourite food. It pleased his vanity to watch them and to remark their gluttony.

But while he paused, a Chinese boy, carrying a covered dish, ran out of the shop in haste to convey the dinner of a customer and, colliding with Hassan el Kasim where he stood, spilt the contents of the dish over Hassan's clean white robe.

Hassan, with a shout of rage, seized the boy and belaboured him soundly about the head and back.

Instantly a large and noisy crowd collected, and Hassan soon realised that it was composed of the enemies of Islam. When it was discovered that the contents of the spilt dish had been a stew of pork, the vile joy of the crowd knew no bounds. While some held Hassan fast, others smeared his bearded face with the gravy on his clothing, and others even forced portions of the filthy meat between his lips.

Insults and curses resounded and, when at last they allowed him to break loose, a few, more evil even than their fellows, followed him like yapping curs as he fled.

He was too blind with shame and misery to know where he went. He had lost his turban in the horrible struggle and his clothing and his face were befouled. If he could have blasted the city and all its inhabitants with the curse of Allah, he would have died happy.

As it was, he ran like a hunted creature, long after he had left his pursuers behind, ran breathing vengeance and hatred, till from exhaustion he tripped and fell against a doorway in a high wall. He was fainting, and his only thought then was the necessity for shelter.

He beat feebly against the door with his open hands, and presently it was opened. He saw a group of Chinese servants, and in their midst a venerable gentleman dressed in flowing silks. Hassan staggered to his feet.

"For the love of Allah, help!" he gasped. "I am persecuted and undone!"

He heard gently murmured orders. He felt the support

of strong hands. In a little while he was within a building, and silent, quick attendants were serving him with hot water, bathing his face, his hands, his feet, and laying before him clean silk clothing.

When he was sufficiently recovered to think of anything beyond his own need, he volunteered explanations, and asked to whom he owed this generous consideration. To all he said the servants remained silent and smiling. But when he was restored, even to a length of fine silk twisted into a decent turban to cover his head, they led him out of the building into a charming garden, where flowering trees bloomed and where, in an arbour of ornamental stone work near a pond covered with lily leaves, his host awaited him.

Then, for the first time, Hassan el Kasim was conscious of a new humility. This clean and simple place must surely be the abode of an idolater, and yet it seemed to him quiet and pure as any mosque. And, as in the house of God, he had the impulse to fall on his knees and give thanks, without any remembrance of bitterness.

He did not kneel, for it was not yet the hour of prayer, and only God is great; but he stood with the dignity of a lowly spirit at the entrance of the arbour and bowed his head and said, "Peace be unto you! I was a stranger and you took me in. For this your reward shall be great in Heaven, and on earth it shall not be forgotten."

The Chinese gentleman beckoned Hassan to sit beside him on a stone bench.

"Only those who are despised and rejected know Truth," he said. "The world has not yet learned the Word. Tell me, friend, your faith. For though I teach some, I also have much to learn."

"There is no faith but this," said Hassan—"that there is one God and Mohammed is His Prophet."

"Has not God had other prophets?" inquired the philosopher.

"Since Adam there have been many," said Hassan. "Mohammed was the last, but el Mahdi—the Guide—will surely come again to lead men back to the way of truth."

"In the way of truth all men are united," said the philosopher.

"Verily," answered Hassan, "when that happens all evil will be overthrown, and the Messiah, who failed once, will return to reign."

"Then the Word will be established," said the philosopher.

"For ever," said Hassan. "This is the Faith and this the Truth. Though we wait long, God is great."

"So great, that where men are, Jên, the Word, may also be," said the philosopher.

Then it seemed suddenly to Hassan el Kasim that his eyes were opened. And he rose up and went out and stood in the garden, which was like a house of prayer.

In that house, which was a corner of the world, a Spirit moved and had its being, the Spirit of all goodness, the Word of all power, the expected of Islam—that for which the prophets were persecuted, that for which the forerunners fought. And a vision of the desired end dawned on Hassan el Kasim, so that he saw the greatness of God reflected in the fellowship of men. It was the Word, so constantly rejected, and ultimately to be triumphant. It was the Guide, so often mistaken, and eventually to be proved. It was the Messiah, so long promised and finally to be recognised.

Pure as the clear sky overhead, simple as the flowers of spring, serene as the lily leaves floating on the pool—this was Truth.

Then Hassan el Kasim saw that the sun was setting, and that therefore it was the hour of evening prayer. And he turned to the west and fell on his knees in the garden and cried with a full heart, "Allah Akbar—God is great!"

CHAPTER XIX

So pleased was Kubilai with Marco's good services, that soon the young man was appointed to the provincial governorship of the city of Yang-chau. This important commercial centre of Manzi was the headquarters of one of the twelve prefectures into which the Empire was now divided.

Marco held this post for three years, and while he lived at Yang-chau, Niccolo and Maffeo went to Lin-gnan Fu.

Marco himself never visited the City of Heaven, but he heard all about it. As he dwelt afterwards on the beauty and charm of the southern ladies (rather impersonally, for they left him heart whole), perhaps he found in their beguilements excuse for his father.

For alas! Niccolo did not remain true to the lady Fiordelisa. His Latin temperament required comfort during the long sojourn in China, but all we know is that, when he died before the end of the century, he left two illegitimate sons, called Stefano and Zannino, who must have been born in the Far East, and who, though never mentioned by Marco, must eventually have returned with the travellers to Venice.

It is tantalising. Somewhere in the silence is surely hidden one of those women, whom a later and less susceptible traveller (Friar Odoric) was to describe as the most beautiful in the world.

For all the immense industry of the fertile country surrounding Yang-chau there was, in Marco's time, no transit beyond roads and rivers. But soon there was begun at Kwa-chau, north of Marco's city, that tremendous engineering feat, the Grand Canal, which, as a means of intercommunication, completed in three years, was one of the chief

glories of Kubilai's reign. A channel of great width was dug from the Yangtse river to connect rivers and lakes and, from the earth thus raised, two embanked roads ran on either side direct to Ta Tu in the north and as far as Lin-gnan Fu in the south—a forty days' journey. The canal was provided with sluices, where vessels of all sizes were hoisted up and let down again by machinery. The high roads on each bank were paved with stone and edged with villages, shops and taverns along their entire extent.

It is only necessary to remember the state of mediæval Europe at the same time, in order to answer the frequent suggestion that China is not progressive.

After his three years' tenure of the appointment at Yang-chau, Marco travelled farther south on another mission for Kubilai, through the modern provinces of Che-kiang, Kiang-si and Fu-kien, till at last he reached the great port of Zayton, where he was to embark for India.

Zayton was then one of the largest and most important havens of the world, frequented by all the traders of Asia. Its glories have now passed, but at this time it was a source of vast revenue to the Empire, through the duties paid on all sorts of merchandise, and was besides rich by the manufacture in an adjacent city of peculiar and fine porcelain.

Among the swarming merchants and the swarthy tattooed mariners of Zayton, crowds greater and more various than any of Venice, we must now leave Marco, bound on further enterprise, to see how Kubilai was meanwhile engaged.

Kubilai's attention had for long been turned towards that island empire of the East, the Chinese and native names of which denote the rising sun. (In Chinese, *Je* = sun; *pen* = origin or rising: hence Japan. In Japanese it is transcribed *Nippon*.)

Early in his reign, on two separate occasions, he had invited its submission with tact and cordiality, quoting the example of its neighbour and his vassal, Korea.

"The wise men who are about me tell me that all men are brothers. The Universe consists of but one family,

and how can useful rules or good laws be upheld in a family where there is discord? "

This invitation was disregarded by Japan, which had had no government relations with China for four hundred years, though some intercourse had been maintained by priests, scholars and traders.

A story * of the origin of these independent islands, more whimsical than any of their own early chronicles, and perhaps no farther from the truth, is worth hearing.

" Very far," says the Chinese record, " in the east of the sea of China is an immense and bottomless abyss, which is called the Universal Confluent, where all the waters of the earth and those of the Milky Way, the residue of heavenly rivers, flow without augmenting or diminishing. Between this gulf and China were once five great islands. The buildings on these islands are of gold and jade; the animals are tame; the vegetation is marvellous, the flowers perfumed, the fruits eternal. The inhabitants are all Genie. They visit each other by flying through the air. At first the islands were not fixed, but floated on the sea. Dissatisfied with their instability, the Genie complained to the Supreme Being, Who gave the order to the Genie of the north to remedy the danger of their being wrecked on the western coast " (of China). " This Genie made fifteen monstrous tortoises support the islands on their backs. Then the islands did not move any more. But one day a giant arrived in those regions and threw his line. He caught six of the tortoises and returned whence he came. Two of the tortoises were then submerged. Between 378 and 279 B.C. it was suggested to the reigning Emperors of China that the remaining Genie of the islands were really men, thus transformed. Expeditions were then made to the islands. They were not far off, but winds and currents prevented any landing. The Genie were said to possess the drug of immortality. The " (Chinese) " Master of Occult Sciences asked for boys and virgins to sacrifice to the Genie in exchange for the drug.

" They were accordingly sent in several thousands.

* Given by Wieger.

They were supposed to be lost, but a Genie met the expedition and asked that another three thousand of each should be sent and a company of artisans. The Master of Occult Sciences took them all, became king of the land of the Rising Sun, and was never heard of again."

The myth is, of course, an allegory, suggesting what is substantially correct, that Japan owed her arts to China. The Genie of the Chinese story are the supernatural Kami of Japanese legend, a separate, belligerent and poetic race, probably aboriginal invaders from the southern ocean, adopted as the divinities of the Japanese Shinto religion and actually the ancestors of the Japanese people.

Consequently, though there was an admixture of Mongoloid blood in the Japanese race, they remained distinct from the mainland, foreign and incomprehensible to the neighbouring continental peoples. Even their arts became individual, with an exuberance of detail which altered them completely from the Chinese classic standard. This difference was due mainly to a country where everything is on a miniature scale, in proportion to the immense vistas of China. And the Japanese passion for cleanliness, in contrast to Chinese carelessness in that respect, is another point of distinction.

When Kubilai sent his envoys to Japan, a family called the Hōjō were at the head of a military regency at Kamakura. The cloistered Emperor and a civil regency ruled at the capital, Kyoto, but as the influence of the court waned, that of the military party, known as the Bakufu, waxed. The Bakufu was not disloyal to the Emperor, but, having enthroned their own choice, they were virtually supreme and under them began the first genuine feudal chieftains.

In answer to Kubilai's envoys, two separate courses were bound to be advocated. The Emperor at Kyoto, taking the message gravely, since a foreign invasion had been prophesied, desired conciliation and delay. The H jō regent at Kamakura proudly advised a contemptuous silence and, of course, prevailed.

In return for this discourtesy, Kubilai sent a small expedition to the island of Tsushima. The governor of

the island would not permit an armed embassy to land, and the Mongols fought and gained a slight victory. They took only two prisoners, who were treated generously by Kubilai and were soon after sent back to Japan, to report on the glories of the Mongol court and the clemency of the Great Khan.

Another diplomatic envoy was sent two years later, only to be instantly deported by the Hōjō regent, then a youth of seventeen called Tokimuné, who had been created ruler at Kamakura on the death of his father.

The insulted envoy then persuaded Kubilai to send a fleet of nine hundred war junks to attack the islands of the Korean Strait. This was done and, after a fierce battle, the Mongols gained possession of Tsushima and Iki.

Thereupon, the lion-hearted young Hōjō Tokimuné mobilised the Japanese forces. But, though heroic, they had no firearms and their horses were terrorised by the Mongol guns and war drums. They therefore retired to a fortress and prepared for a siege, but the Mongols now retreated to their ships, and soon after, sustaining some damage from stormy weather, retired.

Encouraged by this success Kubilai sent another envoy. The five persons comprising it were promptly betrayed and executed like common malefactors.

Yet again, after an interval an envoy went, only to be again murdered.

There could now be no further thought of peace.

Up to this time the Sung campaign had engaged Kubilai. The end of this left him free to indulge his just wrath. He organised a navy large enough finally to crush Japan. Four thousand four hundred war junks, carrying one hundred and forty thousand Chinese, Mongol and Korean troops, sailed and formed a junction in the Tsushima strait.

Hōjō Tokimuné, who had only desired war from the beginning, put his whole country into a state of defence and the Japanese rose to a man in answer to the stirring proclamation that he issued.

The members of entire families enlisted. Every temple

and every shrine was crowded with supplicants, offering prayers and incense to the Kami. The people wept tears of rage and never doubted that, by the power of the gods if not by the strength of the Bakufu, the great Mongol Armada would be defeated.

The lady Shizuka, bride of a young daimyo (nobleman) of Kamakura, who had, of course, gone to the war, was sad at heart. Her lord, who was the light of her life, had left her for the sake of the country and, though she had girded on his sword with her own hands, though she had shed no tears in bidding him farewell, sick fear was now her only bedfellow and companion, a monstrous spectre in place of him whom she adored.

She had as yet no child to share her love, which was all centred on her glorious husband. She worshipped him as a flower the sun. That he should ever have deigned to make her his, seemed to her a divine miracle.

She came one day into the chief apartment of their simple dwelling, which, like the houses of all Samurai warriors was characterised by an austere simplicity, superior only to other residences in that it was roofed with copper bronze and surrounded with a wide verandah.

The lady Shizuka wore loose trousers of grey silk crêpe, fastened with a narrow belt, knotted in front, and over these a long flowing robe with voluminous sleeves of dead leaf-coloured brocade. Her black hair, long, unbound and undecorated with any ornament, was gathered into a box, which was carried behind her by an aged female attendant, dressed in the skirted robe of the serving class.

When Shizuka sank on to a pile of cushions on the matted floor, the attendant carefully removed the hair from the box and spread it out behind her mistress like a cape. She then brought tea in a covered cup of Chinese porcelain on a tray of black lacquer, exquisitely decorated with three golden fish and standing four inches high from the ground.

"I want no refreshment," said Shizuka, "least of all a beverage that has come from an enemy country."

"O honourable lady!" answered the old woman,

" what can I do ? Have I not newly shaved your eyebrows and painted your face and blackened your teeth, that you may forget melancholy for a little ? Shall I bring a mirror, that you may contemplate your beauty and be glad ? "

" How should I wish for beauty when my lord is far away ? " sighed Shizuka.

The old woman groaned in sympathy, removed the tray and presently brought a bronze vase containing one pale and perfect iris flower, which she placed directly in the lady's view.

" Behold, O darling ! " she crooned. " What a subject for poetry ! Does it not inspire you to happier thoughts ? "

" There is no rhyme or reason in life when my lord is not here," said Shizuka.

But when the old woman brought a horizontal harp and set it before the lady, Shizuka's fingers strayed over its thirteen strings and presently, improvising, she sang—

" On flower petals,
The paths that honey bees take
Are not so open
As roads I tread for love's sake,
Nor rough as those of heart ache . . ."

The old woman applauded. " Charming—the correct rhythm—the pure idea ! The flower could not fail to give inspiration."

" No," said Shizuka, " it is not poetry. I am blind and deaf to beauty. Tell me rather, what news of the war ? "

The old woman came and sat at her mistress' feet.

" Since the enemy landed on the coasts of Tsushima and Iki, there has not been much news," she muttered sadly, shaking her head. " Most of the people of those islands were killed or captured, and it is said that these demons straight from hell devour the bodies of the vanquished."

" I know, I know," cried Shizuka. " Is there not panic in the capital, where no brave men remain ? Have not the temples been crowded ever since ? And do the

sounds of litanies and drums and bells and the movements of the vestal dances ever cease? But did none escape from the disaster on those islands?"

"Some wounded hid in the mountains, taking with them their families, and mothers slew their own children, lest the wailing of infants should reveal the place to the enemy."

"It was right," said Shizuka fiercely. "What is a child beside a beloved man who may fight again for the country?"

"Lately it is rumoured that other islands have been seized, despite the stockades built to impede the enemies' landing."

"Are they invulnerable that such defences cannot keep them off?"

"I have heard that they wear heavier armour than our men. Also it seems that, besides powerful crossbows, they have weapons that cast forth flames with a noise like thunder. And these flames set fire to the great wooden shields on our stockades."

"It is past belief," said Shizuka. "We could defeat any mortal foe, but these are indeed devils. And my lord, radiant as a heavenly spirit, has gone to meet them! Alas, is the sun to be swallowed by the night or can he return triumphant?"

At this moment a rider galloped up to the outer verandah, where there ensued sounds of commotion.

"He comes!" cried Shizuka. "Go quickly, Aki, and see whether it can be my lord!"

But before the old woman could reach the screened entrance, a warrior in lacquered armour appeared, carrying in one hand his heavy iron helmet, and in the other his painted and hair-fringed mask of ferocious aspect. His head, shaved bare from brow to nape of neck, glistened with sweat, and his pale face was more ghastly than his mask.

He stood just within the screen and said in a loud voice, "O lady, I have fought beside the daimyo all day! I have come back now only to bind my wounds and then to return."

"Approach," said Shizuka, "and, while my women attend you, give me news of my lord and the battle."

Serving maids came and helped him to divest himself of his armour, revealing his blood-stained under-garments. The shaft of an arrow was broken in his neck, and he was wounded besides in shoulder and knee. He came and squatted before Shizuka, drew the shaft from his neck and cast it away with a grunt. Then, while he washed in water that was brought to him and bound his wounds with strips of cotton cloth that the women handed to him, he spoke.

"We attacked the enemy at the island of Shiga last night. The fight still rages. His great ships are drawn up in line and fastened together with iron chains. . . . Give me a wad of wool to stop this flow of blood. A thicker piece! Now, draw the bandage tight! . . . I cannot tell you the size of his ships. They tower above ours like castles. And there are planks laid from one to the other, so that they are solid like battlements. From these battlements the enemy rains fire and thunder and arrows upon our decks."

"What news of my lord?" said Shizuka.

"I was with the daimyo when we made a dash from the shore in his boat. He was wounded in the right arm, so that he could not draw his bow. But I was beside him and continued to shoot arrows. He took his sword and went on, till the boat touched the side of the nearest towering ship. It was too high for us to board, so we cut down our own mast and used it as a ladder to climb up to the enemy's deck. We fought the devils hand to hand, he and I alone, standing back to back. Banzai!" *

"How fared my lord?" said Shizuka.

"Now bring fresh water that I may drink. . . . I had killed five men, when I saw that he was down and surrounded. I fought my way to the side and lo! another of our boats had come up and another daimyo was preparing to board the ship as we had done. I kept back the enemy till the second of our masts was in position as a ladder. In the end we took an enemy officer prisoner."

* "Hurrah!" Literally: "Ten thousand years!" or "Viva!"

"My lord—what had happened to my lord?" said Shizuka.

"He died for Nippon. . . . Now I am restored. Bring my armour! . . . They cut off his head and his hands and threw his body into the sea—Banzai, O lady! Revenge is sweet! Banzai!"

He laughed, for only so can grief be expressed in Japan. And Shizuka drew her mouth into a grin and whispered "Banzai!" as she watched him go.

That head which had so often lain on her breast. . . . Those hands which had so often caressed her. . . . That body dearer than her own. . . .

She did not weep nor move. She could not speak. For days and nights she sat there, very still, like a pensive doll in an empty room. When the old woman, Aki, told her the news that the Mongols, alarmed by the repeated daring onslaughts of the Japanese, had separated their ships, weighed anchor and retired to the coast of Hizen province, Shizuka faintly smiled.

When Aki repeated the rumour that every one at Kyoto was so alarmed that they were incapable of anything but continued prayer, and that the Emperor had offered his own life as a sacrifice, in an autograph letter to the gods, Shizuka faintly sighed. But herself, she did not pray, nor eat, nor change her clothes.

On a hot night of July, Aki, weary with watching beside her mistress, slept. Shizuka, seeing this, rose up and gliding softly as a ghost to the screen entrance, looked out.

On the verandah, the serving maids also slept. The garden, where Shizuka had never walked unattended, lay beyond, black and mysterious in contrast to the dim light shed by a white paper lantern that hung above the wooden steps. With her long hair sweeping behind her, and with shoes of blue leather embroidered with white thread on her feet, Shizuka descended the steps into the dark garden. Through the dark garden she went, under the arched gateway that led out on to the open moorland. Here she climbed upwards to a cliff that overlooked the sea.

And the night was hot and still and sombre, like a closed cell.

On the cliff, Shizuka fell upon her face, pressing her body against the ground, and clutching the turf with her fingers.

"Hear me, O Powers that dwell below the earth!" she breathed. "Hear me and arise. Have you not drunk the blood of heroes? Have you not feasted on their bones? Are you less lusty than they, that you should not come forth in the hour of need? Arise, O Kami! and blow with your mouths a wind compounded of women's sighs. Arise, O Kami! and lift waves heavy with women's tears. We have not moaned, neither have we wept. We have saved for your use the breath of our bodies and the water of our eyes. In this we have been strong, O Kami! worthy to mate with heroes. Use our strength, O Kami! and arise for Nippon, arise!"

She waited. And suddenly there was a sound of crying in the air, like the wail of many women, which rose and died and rose again. Then the wind of the typhoon broke from the north-west, with a rushing, terrible noise, like that of innumerable sighs blown forth. And forked lightning blazed across the sky, like the frenzy of passion, and thunder shattered the clouds like the fury of abandonment.

Shizuka lifted herself to her knees.

"We are strong," she shrieked, "strong to prevail! What is stronger than the love of women? Blow wind, laden with our breath! Rise waves, fed by our tears! The ships of the enemy shall be shattered on the broken hearts of Nippon!"

She tried to regain her feet. But no living thing could have stood in that tempest. Crouching on the ground once more, with her long black hair blown straight out behind her like a flag, she raised her face and her arms to the sky.

"We are avenged, O Kami! Banzai! Banzai!"

The waves of the sea that night ran mountain high. The iron chains connecting the ships of the Mongol fleet

were snapped like ribbons. The Great Armada was scattered and smashed, as another Great Armada of later date more familiar to Western readers. With torn sails and broken masts, it was dashed to pieces and torn asunder on the rocky coasts of Japan. One hundred thousand Mongol troops perished in this disaster.

A miserable remnant of the fleet weathered the typhoon, and the survivors reached Tsushima, where they attempted to repair their ships with a view to escape. But they were attacked here by the Japanese, and all but three men, who were allowed to return and tell the story in China, were exterminated.

CHAPTER XX

On their arrival in China, the three survivors of the Great Armada dared not at first reveal the truth of the disaster. They gave a strange and garbled account of quarrels among Mongol and Korean officers, of a temporary capture of the great island of Japan and of the invulnerability of the Japanese due to their magic arts.

Their story was believed by every one, including Marco Polo.

It was long before Kubilai knew the facts. The discouraging want of news that continued made him anxious to send another fleet. He was fortunately dissuaded and, as the truth gradually reached him, he abandoned the idea of the conquest of Japan, just before the great soldier Hōjō Tokimuné, to whose patriotism resistance had been mainly due, died at the early age of thirty-four.

In fact, had Kubilai made another effort, it is possible that he would have succeeded, for the land of the Rising Sun was now falling under the dominion of the Shinto and Buddhist priesthood. The priests, pretending that the typhoon had been the result of their prayers, wormed their way into the Councils of State and tapped the revenues of the country for their own benefit.

But at this time a great personal sorrow fell on Kubilai. His favourite wife, Jambui, she who had converted him to his own pure Buddhist faith, she who had befriended the family of the Sung, she whose serene influence had controlled the court, died after a short illness.

It was a bitter blow. Kubilai suddenly felt old, tired and more conscious than ever of the jealous intolerance of the Chinese. He longed to follow her, but she had begged

him to wait for the sake of the Empire and until the illumination of his own soul should be complete.

"Then, dear lord, surely we shall be reunited in that fullness of light, where there is no rebirth. Only that you may not be alone, it is my wish that your second wife, who is of the Kungrad clan from which I came, should be raised to the position of Empress. Promise me this."

"I promise, beloved."

"Call her by my name," murmured Jambui. "She loves you well and is fair. No one is fit to mate with Kubilai but ladies of the Kungrad clan."

"No others shall enjoy my favour," said Kubilai; "but no others shall have the love I have given to you."

"Then can we never be separated, my lord! I shall always be with you. Hold me in your arms—so. This memory will comfort you, and I fall asleep happy. . . ."

When she had gone, he tried to fill his empty arms, but no other wife or concubine of the Kungrad clan, carefully though the fairest ladies of that tribe were chosen for him, could replace Jambui in his heart.

Neither could his sons console or interest him. Not one of them and he had many, was as dear to him as Marco Polo; and Marco, whom he trusted above any, was constantly absent on missions, which only he seemed fit to conduct.

Jambui had given him four sons, the eldest of whom died young, and the second of whom was that Ching-kin, who has already been mentioned as the enemy of Achmath, the Minister of State. These four and three others, out of the total number of twelve sons, enjoyed the Chinese title of Wang, or Prince, and controlled various provinces, including also the late kingdom of Tangut.

Ching-kin, the heir apparent, died at the age of forty-three, on the threshold of a great career, for he was more able than any of his brothers and universally beloved. Having followed the Imperial example in marrying a lady of the Kungrad clan, he left three sons and several daughters, but unhappily there must have been something amiss in that mating. The eldest son squinted, and the second was

affected with rickets. Kubilai therefore chose the youngest, Timur, as his successor, and, pending that time, appointed him governor at Karakorum.

In his youth, Timur, who eventually became the Great Khan after his grandfather, was notoriously gluttonous and drunken. Kubilai had no sympathy with the vices of his people and often severely reprimanded the young prince. At last he appointed physicians to see that Timur ate and drank moderately. But it came to his ears that an alchemist, in Timur's pay, on the pretence of medical attendance, had prescribed a course of baths filled with wine instead of water. Great was Kubilai's wrath. He sent for Timur and extracted a confession.

Then, " Do not you know the law of your great ancestor, Chingiz ? " he said in an awful voice.

" Assuredly," answered the unfortunate youth. " He said, concerning the use of fermented liquor, ' If you cannot refrain, get drunk only three times a month.' "

" You have not kept within that limit."

Timur hung his head. " It is true, O my grandfather."

" The just punishment for that vice is the bastinado."

" For the common people, sir."

" Are you so superior that you should not be treated in the same way ? Is not it rather necessary that you should be an example ? "

" Sir, I beseech you, consider our prestige."

" I have," answered Kubilai. " I will not hand you over to an official. But, thanks be to Heaven, my own right arm is still strong, and I have here a rod. Remove your boots and lie down ! "

On three separate occasions did Kubilai thus, with his own hands, inflict the bastinado on his grandson. And the result of an unspared rod was the complete reform of Timur, who developed into a humane and prudent ruler, well liked by the Chinese.

Only after his short reign of thirteen years, did that struggle among members of the Mongol line for dominion, which had begun in the enmity of Kaidu Khan, bring the dynasty to disaster.

Timur was followed by his weak nephew, Yissun Timur, a son of the brother who squinted, and the succeeding Emperors, no less weak, fell more and more under the dominion of their Lama priests and lost sight finally of the uniting quality of Jên, by which Kubilai had ruled.

Instead of his just and well-ordered government, founded on Chinese precedents and arrangements of administrative machinery, the control of the Empire, divided at last into eighteen instead of the original twelve provinces, became confused and unwieldy.

The Khanates of Persia and the Golden Horde, which had owed allegiance to Kubilai but had special rulers, had a history resembling that of the Dominions of the British Empire. At first they were an integral part, then they had a substantive government of their own, owing only mediate allegiance to the central authority. This authority remained great while the Imperial family was united, but, weakened by rebellions and the removal of the capital from Mongolia to China, it perished.

While preserving discipline in his own family, Kubilai looked also still further to enlarge his mighty Empire. After the death of Jambui, there was nothing left to him but ambition, yet, without her good influence, the fact remains that he was unsuccessful, and his arms were defeated in Cochin China and in Java.

Meanwhile, the enmity of Kaidu Khan continued and at last, Kubilai himself, though old, marched against a chieftain in Manchuria, with whom Kaidu had made an allegiance. This chieftain was related to Kubilai and was a Christian called Nayan.

Kubilai rode in an immense wooden structure mounted on the backs of four elephants, and the greater part of his host of Mongol horsemen had each a foot soldier, armed with a lance, on the crupper behind him.

Nayan and his people were taken by surprise, but rushed to arms, and both armies burst into song before the conflict, to the beating of drums and the playing of two-stringed instruments called balalaikas.

A great battle was fought, lasting throughout the day, and Nayan was vanquished, taken prisoner and put to death. But the Manchurian rebellion did not end there. It was continued by Nayan's descendants, against whom Kubilai sent his grandson Timur.

Nor was it the last time that Kubilai himself took the field. For towards the end of his life, he actually moved against Kaidu, who, however, eluded him then and survived him after, continuing strife throughout central Asia.

This was the greatest and most bitter failure of Kubilai's reign—a failure from which not even Bayan could save him. Bayan did, indeed, inflict one defeat on Kaidu, but then he retired to China, where he was appointed again as first Minister of State and commander of the Imperial troops. He outlived Kubilai for only one year.

And who shall say that he did not retire and die happy, in that he had met and overcome Kaidu's daughter in the field of war?

Time passed swiftly and easily for the Polos. Niccolo enjoyed some kind of domesticity. Maffeo remained a bachelor, wedded to trade. Marco kept the heart of a youth and was always so absorbed by his work for Kubilai, that he had neither time nor inclination for personal interests. Eventually he returned once more from a distant journey to his father's house at Ta Tu, for the New Year festivities which took place in February.

At the age of thirty-six he was a fine man; his figure well set, his head noble, his expression more often whimsical than stern. Close-cropped, crisply waving hair of a warm brown surmounted the high brow, where further experience was to etch lines of thought. Already the deep-set, visionary, grey eyes were marked with crowsfeet of humour and, from the corners of a rather large nose, fortitude had drawn creases to the edges of a strong but gentle mouth. Above the short beard, lighter in colour and coarser than the hair, the shapely ears were set low and far back with classic symmetry.

It was a face to inspire confidence and affection, and

his dignified mien and the care he gave to his personal appearance did much to enhance his attraction.

He was no fop, but a great gentleman, so aware of the right relation to his fellows that all discourtesy, whether of manners or of aspect, was for him impossible. He had, indeed, learned during this time the Chinese view of propriety, founded on the teaching of the Great Master, Chu Hsi.

According to that teaching, there are four clues or feelings to the four essential virtues. Solicitude is the terminal of Jên, the first and all-embracing virtue; conscientiousness is the terminal of righteousness, courtesy is the terminal of reverence, and moral insight is the terminal of wisdom. And again, since solicitude is the clue to Jên, so, like that Word, the feeling of solicitude is the fountain head, from which all other good feelings proceed.

Marco found his father and uncle unexpectedly troubled in mind.

"We have been considering the future," said grey-headed Niccolo. "The Great Khan grows aged. When his time to depart this life comes, as come it must before very long, what will be our position here?"

"I have already said that we should do well to return to our own country, with all the gear we have collected," said Maffeo, still the more enterprising of the brothers.

"I care not where we go, or what we do," went on Niccolo. "Sorrow has visited me lately. There is nothing now to keep me here."

Only in these words did he refer to the end of that romance, which has been deduced from the fact that two sons resulted from a union contracted during the sojourn in China.

Marco now saw Stefano and Zannino for the first time, and accepted, without comment, the unexplained presence of the pair of bright youngsters, who treated him deferentially as an elder brother.

"It is possible," said Maffeo drily, "that Madonna Fiordelisa and my namesake at Venice believe, by this time, that they are respectively widow and orphan."

" Alas ! " sighed the incorrigible Niccolo. " Fiordelisa was passing fair. I loved her well. She would surely never have married again."

" Why, then, should not you both return ? " suggested Marco.

For himself, he had no wish to leave China, and even if Kubilai should die, he was still young enough to take the chance of succeeding Imperial favour.

" That is the rub," said Maffeo. " The Great Khan will on no account give us permission to go. We have already suggested it, and his answer is a firm refusal, for he says that we are the only friends that he can trust. Also he makes of it a matter of sentiment, saying how can we desert him in his old age, when we have enjoyed his patronage for so long."

" That is true," said Marco gravely. " To give him pain would be a poor return for his goodness."

" My son," said Niccolo, " you have more influence with the Great Khan than your uncle or I. You must, for our sakes, endeavour to make him see reason. And, as your duty is first to us, and we are growing too old to undertake the long journey home alone, you must come with us. Consider the matter well. Do not you desire to see Venice again ? You have given great services to this country, but our Republic needs good service too. Her enemies are perhaps still undefeated. How can we tell, having no news ? But rest assured, that greater honour and glory than we have known here await us in the West."

" I should regret leaving this great Empire, never probably to see it again," said Marco. " But I will do what I can."

The difficulty, however, had to be postponed for the present, since the New Year feast, at which he now heard that Kubilai intended to receive a certain important embassy from Persia, had first to be considered.

For some time before this grand occasion, which annually among the Chinese saw the payment of all debts, the settlement of all affairs, and the interchange of presents, the whole city of Ta Tu was in commotion. Merchandise

entered the gates in greater quantities than ever, markets were crowded, shop signs were newly painted, tiled roofs and memorial arches were cleaned till they glowed like enamels, and every one bought new and gaily coloured clothes. For the Feast of the New Year was then, and still is, in China comparable in gaiety to the Christmas Festival in the West. One of the great points of difference between Mongols and Chinese was that the Mongols chose the same occasion for their annual White Feast, when the whole court wore white garments, though white was, for the Chinese, a symbol of mourning.

No doubt this detail, due to a different symbolism, gave offence, for a later Chinese dynasty took care to alter the mistake.

But now, while the city was decked with all the colours of the rainbow, the ceremony of the Imperial reception was rehearsed, three days before the event, in the Temple of Longevity of the Emperor and of the Ten Thousand Tranquillities. After this solemn rehearsal, necessary to preclude any error of ritual, the throne-room and the vestibule of the palace were newly cleaned, decorated and perfumed with incense.

At early dawn on the great day, snow fell and, while rockets and other fireworks exploded in the city, and crowds carrying banners and making music began to parade the streets, the court chamberlains of the Imperial demesne received the invited guests at the top of the marble stairways and conducted them to the audience hall.

Among the thronging guests came the Polos; Marco magnificent in doublet and hose of white silk brocade and a cloak of white velvet lined with sheepskin; his father and uncle no less finely attired also all in white.

In the splendid hall, the red leather hangings on the walls, the golden columns and the golden peacocks, which rhythmically flapped their wings, afforded the only colours, as a background to the company, which had the aspect of a gradually gathering and enormous snow drift.

In the centre of the hall stood a huge wine jar of milk-white jade, hooped with gold, carved with dragons and

fringed with a network of pearls. Into this jar, wine was conveyed by conduits from the outer court, and before it was ranged a golden coffer set with golden goblets.

The guests conversed and soft music of stringed instruments sounded from an ante-chamber. While Marco was greeting his own friends, Niccolo and Maffeo were introduced to the newly arrived ambassadors from Persia, and were soon deep in conversation with those gentlemen. Officials presently entered and, passing from guest to guest, described details of the forthcoming ceremonial.

" The captains of the guard have entered the Hall of Repose, taking their ivory tablets. Make ready for the kow-tow. His Imperial Majesty will shortly leave his private apartment."

Three chamberlains with interpreters followed and led the guests by hand to the right side and the left. The main doorways on the south, called Essence of the Sun and Flowers of the Moon, were thrown open. From without came sounds of acclamation, the rolling of chariot wheels and the cracking of whips.

Presently the procession entered, preceded by the captains of the guard, who remained guarding the doorways, and by heralds with halberds, who blew a blast on silver trumpets.

Kubilai Khan, dressed with exquisite simplicity in fine white silk, came in by the Essence of the Sun, followed by his sons, dignitaries and courtiers. The reigning Empress came in by the Flowers of the Moon, followed by Kubilai's other wives, princesses and ladies.

When Kubilai and his consort were enthroned at the north end of the hall and all their attendants were ranged according to rank and degree below them, a chamberlain cried in a loud voice, " Bow and adore ! "

Then all the white-robed members of the vast company prostrated themselves three times before the throne, in the kow-tow, touching the ground with their foreheads.

Serving men, dressed all in white and with silk napkins

over their mouths, then ran in from other entrances and served wine from the jade jar to all, while music and singing sounded from the ante-chamber.

After all had drunk, an official announced, " The hour has arrived when the cock has finished crowing ! "

This meant that, as the sun had risen and every one was refreshed, the Emperor was now ready to receive his guests and ministers.

They were presented to him severally, while a chamberlain intoned the prayer, in which each one joined :

" Vast Heaven, which extends so far, Earth which follows its will, we invoke you and we supplicate you to cover the Emperor and the Empress with blessings ! Grant that they may live ten thousand times ten thousand years ! "

This was the New Year's wish, and for each Kubilai had a gracious individual word of acknowledgment.

As the guests and ministers concluded this separate ceremony, they were passed out through a door behind the throne to an adjacent room called the Vermilion Pavilion. Here, on a richly decorated altar stood a tablet of red lacquer, engraved in gold with the name and titles of Kubilai, and before it a beautiful censer. Each person, passing before the altar, took this censer and reverently swung it around the tablet. From here they proceeded outside to the great terrace overlooking the palace square, and once more awaited the presence of the Emperor.

When Kubilai again appeared, the sun was already high and the great square was radiant with newly fallen snow. The roofs glittered with frost and were hung with icicles, so that even Nature seemed to be bedecked in white raiment and the finest jewels to do honour to the New Year feast.

It was now time for the presentation of gifts to the Emperor and the display was without parallel. All the twelve provinces of China sent offerings in multiples of nine, the lucky number, and all vassal countries sent their embassies.

First, thousands of white horses, richly caparisoned, were paraded, ridden by Mongols, entering at one gate and departing by another.

Then came a vast procession of elephants, no less than five thousand of the huge beasts, covered with housings of decorated cloth, and each carrying two coffers, which contained new wealth for the Imperial treasury.

Then followed cattle; oxen from the steppes, pulling carts painted in bright colours and gold leaf, strange long-haired yaks from Tibet, and droves of sheep.

These were followed by a long line of two-humped camels, laded with commodities and splendid in their trappings of scarlet, purple and gold.

Presently appeared more individual presents—tame cormorants from the Yangtse river, carried on perches by stalwart Chinese fishermen and intended to be used now on northern streams or lakes; hooded falcons borne on the hands of huntsmen; furry-feathered fowls brought as curiosities from Fu-kien in large wicker cages.

But a greater oddity than these was a female orang-outang ape led in chains, and hailing from the forests of the Eastern Archipelago. No one having ever before seen such a rare beast, all thought it must be a woman clothed in her own hair, and wondered exceedingly at the report of her immense strength.

When this amazing pageant had passed, the snowy square, trodden and defiled by so many feet, was for a few moments empty.

Then a double line of men-at-arms in leather came running through the gates, prostrated themselves before the palace, and separated to each side. From the middle gateway, hitherto unopened, there bounded, thereupon, a full-grown maned lion from Turkestan. He had been caught and tamed as a cub, and now, after one regal glance around, he advanced to the foot of the palace wall and faithfully performed the trick that months of training had taught him. In fact, he excelled it, for first he lifted his glorious head and roared aloud. Then he crouched on his forepaws and bent that head three times to the ground.

Thus the king of beasts made his kow-tow to the Great Khan.

A shout of acclamation and joy arose from the Imperial party and all the guests on the terrace.

Kubilai himself smiled, clapped his hands and threw a jewel from his dress to the lion's feet.

And when he did this one light young voice outlasted all the rest.

"Hao tzo!" it cried, in child-like glee. "Hao tzo!" ("Well done!")

And Marco Polo looked towards the owner of the voice and beheld a lady, most beautiful and beguiling.* At the great feast, which followed the display of gifts, he learned her name, and realised that he had heard it before.

She was Kokachin, a princess of the Mongol tribe of Bayaut, and her age was seventeen.

* The words of the old French text are: "moult bele dame et avenant."

CHAPTER XXI

It was enough at first for him to stand and watch her from a distance.

She had the glamour of far lands waiting to be explored. Her eyes were dark as virgin forests, mysterious and still. Her lovely face was alight with laughter, like rippling water in the sun. The Botta head-dress that she wore, like all the Mongol ladies of the court, draped for the occasion with white silk to match her clinging gauzy robes and surmounted with high white quills, gave her a regal height, which, without it, she would have lacked. Her figure was that of a child, slim and reed-like. When she moved, she swayed, resembling a floating flower with a silver stem.

She was most beautiful and beguiling. He never found other words to describe her. He had remarked the beauty of other women, but hers was superlative. And it struck him when all the ardour of his Latin temperament, so long restrained, was ready to overflow.

He did not ask to be presented to her. Already he felt he knew her well. Already she possessed him. He remembered that she had been brought up at the Mongol court. She was that little maiden who had given such a charming welcome to the children of the Sung family. And surely the Chinese princess, who kept close beside her now, must be the same small Princess of Manzi to whom Kokachin had offered sisterly love, and to whom she still showed protective affection.

The Princess of Manzi did not interest Marco. She was like a dainty doll, tottering on her minute feet. He could imagine the most beautiful picking her up and running, strong and clean-limbed, vaulting to a horse's

back, riding astride like a boy, no tender flower merely, but a companion for a man. . . .

It was very strange. Remotely he had contemplated giving his heart some day to a fair and demure lady, who would be proud to continue the line of the Polos. And now he, the great traveller, the associate of kings, the friend of Kubilai, trembled and was afraid.

A few days after the New Year's Feast, he was summoned to a private interview with Kubilai. Before he went, his father and uncle reminded him to press the point that they all desired to leave China. Marco's heart sank. He had less desire than ever to leave China.

Kubilai wished to tell him about the mission from Persia.

"There are envoys from Arghun Khan, ruling now in Transoxiana. He is the grandson of my brother Hulagu and a powerful prince. It seems his favourite wife has lately died, and he is very sorrowful. I can feel for him. The circumstances have some resemblance. For she was of a Mongol tribe, and on her deathbed asked Arghun to choose another wife from among her own people."

"These ambassadors have come then to solicit your authority, Sire?" said Marco.

"That is so. It is a grave matter of State, for it is necessary that Arghun should be satisfied, lest he should support Kaidu. There is only one lady suitable, and she is to me as a daughter. I love not the character of Arghun, but it would be a great marriage for her. The difficulty is how to send her with the envoys, since there is war on the western frontier with Kaidu's troops. And, though the envoys came through safely, there would be grave risk for a lady in such a journey."

"Might they not return by sea, Sire?" suggested Marco.

"Then the risk might be greater, for we Mongols are not able mariners, like men of your race."

Marco took the opportunity of the compliment to mention the wish of Niccolo and Maffeo. Kubilai concluded that he identified himself with his father and uncle.

"No," he said decidedly. "No, I cannot let any of

you go. Whom could I trust like you? I am growing old. It is not possible that you should desert me at the end of my days."

Marco's heart rose. But, in duty bound, he said, "It is only that my respected father and uncle feel, Sire, that should you leave this Empire, which Heaven forbid for many long years, they could not remain under your successor. For myself, none would be sadder than I to go."

"I see their point," said Kubilai. "Timur will reign after me and, though I have done all that one man can do to establish peace, there is still no peace. Alas! Marco, we human beings are poor contrivers! We do not build so well as the bird her nest or the bee her comb. And, though our desire may be for as fair an order, our little lives are not long enough. I have trusted you, Marco, and I love you well. I would be loth to let you go."

But this time there was doubt in the sadness of his voice, and Marco wondered, with a pang of regret, whether he had said too much, wondered too whether any other good reason was working in Kubilai's mind against their mutual desire.

No more was said then on this matter.

In the days that followed, Marco greatly longed to see the lady Kokachin again.

He haunted the palace, but she did not appear. He roamed the park, but she was never among other ladies and cavaliers riding towards the Green Mount or strolling on the shores of the lake.

At last, exasperated with himself for not having taken the opportunity of an introduction to her when he had noticed her at the New Year's Feast, he asked Niccolo about her, casually, to hide his anxiety.

"I have heard there is a certain lady called Kokachin at the court, my father. Are you acquainted with her?"

"Why yes," said Niccolo; "a pretty and a charming maid, with whom Arghun Khan of Persia should surely be well pleased."

"Arghun Khan?"

"Did not you know? The envoys who came from him

were deputed to take back a lady of the Bayaut tribe, to which his first and favourite wife belonged, and to which he looks for another. Since the lady Kokachin is in every way suitable, and since it appears Arghun Khan is impatient, they are to risk again the land journey by which they came and return with a great escort before long."

"I did not know," said Marco.

"'Tis quite a romance," continued Niccolo, chuckling. "They say the lady is greatly taken with Arghun's miniature that has been shown to her, and indeed, from all accounts, his good looks must be remarkable—better, perhaps, than his character. That, no doubt, has suffered from the misfortune of his early days. For after Borak of the house of Jagatai, who was in league with Kaidu, was defeated by Arghun and his father, the throne of Persia was seized by Arghun's uncle and Arghun himself was taken prisoner by this uncle and cruelly used. Then it was that this Mongol wife of Arghun's (the lady who has lately died) stuck to him right loyally and shared all his hardships, till his uncle's men rebelled and set him free and established him in power. And on that, Arghun cursed his uncle and put him to death. All this I had from the envoys, who are Mongols and right pleasant gentlemen."

"I did not know," said Marco again, and turned away.

"Stay," cried Niccolo, "what answer did Kubilai give when you asked that we might go?"

But, like a deaf man, Marco went on and out, and the same day left Ta Tu to go hunting at Chagan Nor.

He tried to forget her. Yet, though sport was good, and though he never saw her departure from the capital with the Persian envoys and a great retinue, he could not forget.

In his memory, she still had the glamour of far and virgin lands waiting to be explored. When he thought of Arghun Khan possessing her, he longed first to meet Arghun Khan in mortal combat. But when he thought of the danger to which she must be exposed on the land journey, he felt sick with the longing to pursue her and catch her up on his saddle bow and ride with her to a

distant seaport, where he could hold her safe on some good ship, that should for ever sail the warm southern ocean.

All his memories of the sea, inherited or experienced, now enfolded his dreams of the lady Kokachin. Only the freedom of the sea was fit for her frank grace; only its salt savour matched the poignancy of her sweetness; only its variety of swelling green billows and oily purple calms seemed the appropriate background of her remote and charming strangeness.

The lady Kokachin was gone. Time passed and, though the dream did not pass, Kubilai Khan would not let the Polos go.

Niccolo and Maffeo grew more and more impatient.

Marco, restless and unhappy, wandered north-westward from Chagan Nor towards Siberia and travelled among the Mongols, who still roamed over the wide plains and among the great mountains and valleys, subsisting on the milk and flesh of their herds and never practising the arts of war. With them, on the shores of Lake Baikal, he hunted the fox, the sable and the wild ass.

Then, moving ever northward, he came to a country impassable for horses, where, accordingly, only dog sleighs were used to traverse the perpetual snow and mud. Here, the people lived in semi-subterranean dwellings, hunted the polar bear and traded in furs with the inhabitants of the bordering Land of Darkness, still farther north.

The mystery and the vigorous climate of that land called to Marco's mood, but he did not stay to explore it. He gleaned some vague information about Siberia, and then a stronger and inexplicable impulse called him to return to Ta Tu.

He had been absent for eight months and, when he arrived at the capital, he discovered what had drawn him. It seemed to him a miracle, but the fact was really not so wonderful. The envoys from the court of Persia, unable to travel with any safety by land, had brought back the lady Kokachin.

Marco was so overjoyed at the mere idea that he might see her again, that he could think of nothing else. His father and uncle were also joyful for another reason.

"Before ever they started," said Niccolo, "I had word with the envoys and told them that the land journey would be too hazardous, and that they would do better to go by sea. But they answered that they were no mariners, and would not listen."

"I said the same to the Great Khan," answered Marco, "and he made the same objection."

"Now is our chance," said Maffeo. "Persians or Mongols may be no mariners, but we know the sea, and if we offer to conduct them, Kubilai cannot choose but let us go."

It was the fulfilment of the dream. Marco forgot Arghun Khan and the end of the journey. He saw himself on a great ship, sailing the wide ocean with the lady Kokachin. The freedom of the sea would encompass them. Its dark or shining solitudes, its rolling hills and vales, its colour and its glory would be theirs.

As a matter of statecraft, delay had made it more urgent than ever that Kokachin should go. The envoys were desperate. They met the Polos and welcomed their suggestion, which was then represented to Kubilai. And the wise mind of Kubilai, that had ruminated this very plan ever since Marco's chance remark so long before, saw now no reason why it should not be carried into effect. There was no reason, except his personal wish to keep the Polos. And the personal wish of the greatest ruler on earth did not count against the duty of a man who stood in the right relation to his fellows.

He sent for the three Polos and received them privately in an inner room of the palace at Ta Tu. The apartment was furnished simply in the Chinese style, with furniture of carved red lacquer and hangings of Imperial yellow silk. Beyond the intricate form of the seats and the lovely colour of the curtains, there was no ornament to distract the eye, and even Kubilai's yellow robe had no decoration but plain bands of beaten gold.

He had aged appreciably during the last few months. The clear colour of his face had faded to an unhealthy pallor; his movements were slow and feeble, and his voice as he greeted them was tired. But as the winter tree or the deflowered stem take on in their stark simplicity some of the innocence of their youth, so the old age of Kubilai was marked with a tender and noble beauty. There was about him nothing either worn or pompous. He had lived well and temperately and, in the evening of his life, he seemed to stand wistfully upon a threshold, where the light of another morning already struck.

He told the Polos to be seated in his presence and asked them frankly to reveal their wishes and their plans. He listened patiently while Niccolo, the spokesman, explained their desire to depart and to seize the opportunity of rendering him a final service, in conducting the Persian envoys and the lady Kokachin on a long sea voyage.

"When first you came," he answered at last, "I knew that I could trust you. When first you left me, I gave unto you a great mission, knowing that it would be well fulfilled. You returned and justified my faith. With that justification, how should not I let you go again? This time I send you on no important embassy alone. But I give into your care a lady who is dear to me as a daughter—nay, two ladies, for the Princess of Manzi, who is the inseparable companion of Kokachin, will go too. We Mongols honour our women, O my friends! Therefore, in committing them to your charge I show to you the highest possible honour."

"We are sensible of it, Sire," said Niccolo, gravely. "And you may be certain that we shall regard these ladies as our own daughters."

"Once," continued Kubilai, turning to Maffeo, "you brought me some holy oil from the West, the which I have regarded ever since as a sacred talisman. I ask you in return to take to Arghun Khan of Persia, these two ladies, whose youth makes them also holy."

"Sire," replied Maffeo, "they shall be for us no less precious than the gift we brought you from Jerusalem."

"My officers shall arrange with you and the Persian envoys all details regarding the voyage," said Kubilai practically. "You will be in supreme command. Everything you require shall be provided. And the golden tablets of authority, that you will again receive, will empower you to demand all in my name. I shall also send letters by you to the potentates of the Far West, to the Kings of England, France and Spain. . . . You will never bring me their answers. I shall have gone, even had you the wish to return in years to come. This, gentlemen, must be my last farewell to you."

Then Niccolo and Maffeo came and knelt before him and Kubilai took and held their hands in turn.

"Heaven bless you, my friends," he said gently. "Heaven keep you, in fair weather and in foul, wherever you travel, by sea or by land, throughout distant countries and in your far city of Venice. And, though we may never meet again in this little world, may Heaven, which brought us together here, reunite us in another and a wider life."

Niccolo bent his grey head and kissed Kubilai's hand.

"I am old too, Sire," he answered in a broken voice, "and though my own country calls me back, I know well that there is another country where kindred souls are never parted. We shall surely feast together again there."

Maffeo looked up at Kubilai with wet eyes.

"I may be later in rejoining you, Sire," he said, "but I will never cease to pray to all the saints that, when the Great Khan holds his court in Paradise, I, in time, may be appointed to that mansion."

"My faithful friends!" said Kubilai, "I shall look for you. Leave me now, for I would have a word alone with the young one."

Niccolo and Maffeo withdrew and Marco approached and took their place, kneeling at Kubilai's feet. He felt the Khan's hands on his shoulders. He did not lift his eyes and no word was spoken. But the pressure of the hands suddenly grew heavier. Kubilai was leaning forward

and swaying in his seat and Marco, looking up, saw that his face was deathly pale. The strong young arms went quickly round the feeble old body and supported it.

"Sire, dearest Sire, are you ill?" cried Marco.

"It is nothing," answered Kubilai faintly. "A moment's vertigo. I feel it sometimes. Hold me so, against your shoulder. You are very strong, Marco. O prop of my old age! must I lose you? O my son! must I let you go?"

"Never, against your wish, dear Sire."

"You comfort me. Always you have comforted and helped. Who am I to keep you? Yours is only another mission, Marco—a mission of trust like those you have undertaken for me before. No, not quite like those. You will guard the lady Kokachin well, my Marco?"

"With my life, Sire."

"She is destined to be the bride of another, Marco. You will love and serve her in that light?"

"I will love and serve her faithfully, Sire—in that light."

"In the fullness of light, where there is no more illusion, we shall all be happy," said Kubilai. "Till then, O my son! till then . . ."

They clung together for a few moments—the old man, surely upon the threshold, and the young man, shaken with his responsibility.

A few days later Marco went with his father and uncle formally to be presented by a court chamberlain to the lady Kokachin and to the Princess of Manzi.

They were received in an apartment of the Empress's palace, where these ladies dwelt. The little princess reclined on a couch covered with white satin, embroidered with peacocks, flamingoes and flowering trees, and caressed against the folds of her peach-coloured and bejewelled dress, girdled with scarves of jade green and pale blue silk, a little tawny-haired dog that wore a necklace of coral and onyx beads. She offered one tiny hand with finger nails of inordinate length, protected by sheaths of

golden filigree, to each of the strange foreign gentlemen in turn. But she did not speak, and only regarded them out of her slanting black eyes like a frightened child.

Marco turned from her and saw his lady sitting carelessly like a boy, astride a black-wood chair, with her arms folded on its back and her charming whimsical face bent to the level of her hands. She was dressed like a Mongol man, in a long coat of green brocade, over breeches of buckskin and high boots of red leather worked in silver thread. Her head was bare and her dark hair hung in two thick plaits, twisted with red and purple ribbons, on either side of her face, to her breast. She looked at him and smiled in the friendliest and frankest manner.

"Do I take you by surprise, sir? They want to make a queen of me. But I am no queen yet. Only a traveller, like yourself. And this garb is the best for long journeys—or so my experience of the last few months has taught me."

She rose to greet Niccolo and Maffeo with deference and dignity.

"Gentlemen, you are welcome. I hear that I am to be in your charge for a great sea voyage. I have never seen the wide ocean, but I love all that is new and hazardous. I fear nothing except the trouble I may give you."

The two elder Polos were enchanted with her easy grace. She made them all be seated and, while they were served ceremoniously with tea, she entertained them with accounts of the land journey that she had already taken, treating all its vicissitudes with humour.

To Marco the variety of her charm seemed endless. She was like no woman he had ever seen. She was simple and courageous as a boy, lithe and strong as a wild animal, and withal glorious as any great lady. She had the same spirit as himself. The wide world was her home and adventure was her beacon. So young was she and so gallant, that she inspired a tender mirth not far from tears.

The preparations for the sea voyage took long to make. But when, after several months more, they were at last completed, the eve of departure came early in the following year.

Kubilai had already taken his private farewell of the Polos. He had seen them since, but always on formal occasions and in company, when his demeanour and theirs were marked with grave reserve.

Now he held a great feast at the palace, in order to speed the whole party and to bestow upon the envoys and his friends gifts of distinction. The dowries of the ladies, Kokachin and the Princess of Manzi, bales of silk and coffers full of jewels, were also displayed, together with rich personal presents that would be delivered to the reigning Khan of Persia, nominally the vassal of Kubilai.

The four Mongol envoys of Arghun Khan first received at the Emperor's own hands their complimentary awards, enclosed in caskets of jade and gold. Then, for each member of the Persian retinue, there were flattering gifts, according to their degree.

Finally, the hoarded wealth that the Emperor chose to shower upon the Polos was paraded in the palace square for all to see, and so magnificent was it that it could only compare with the offerings made to Kubilai himself at the New Year festival.

Horses, camels, elephants, cattle or wild beasts were not, of course, in evidence, though there were, as curiosities, some long-haired yaks, one of which actually arrived at last in Venice, a collection of valuable hawks, and various pedigree dogs. But the freight animals, which carried chests full of gold and silver plate and precious stones, rolls of velvet and silk, and cases of lacquer packed with porcelain and jade, formed a line of immense length.

With the animals went a host of Chinese servants, who were to be the personal attendants of the Polos; men famed as cooks, butlers, barbers, manicurists and masseurs: also jugglers for their amusement and astrologers to predict their fates.

After the great procession had passed, Kubilai with his own hands arrayed first Niccolo, then Maffeo and then Marco in Chinese robes of red unsheared velvet, the only ornament of which was an intricate design of good omen wrought by the most delicate cutting. The worth of these

robes was probably beyond price, as much by the value of the material as by the unique simplicity of its ornament.

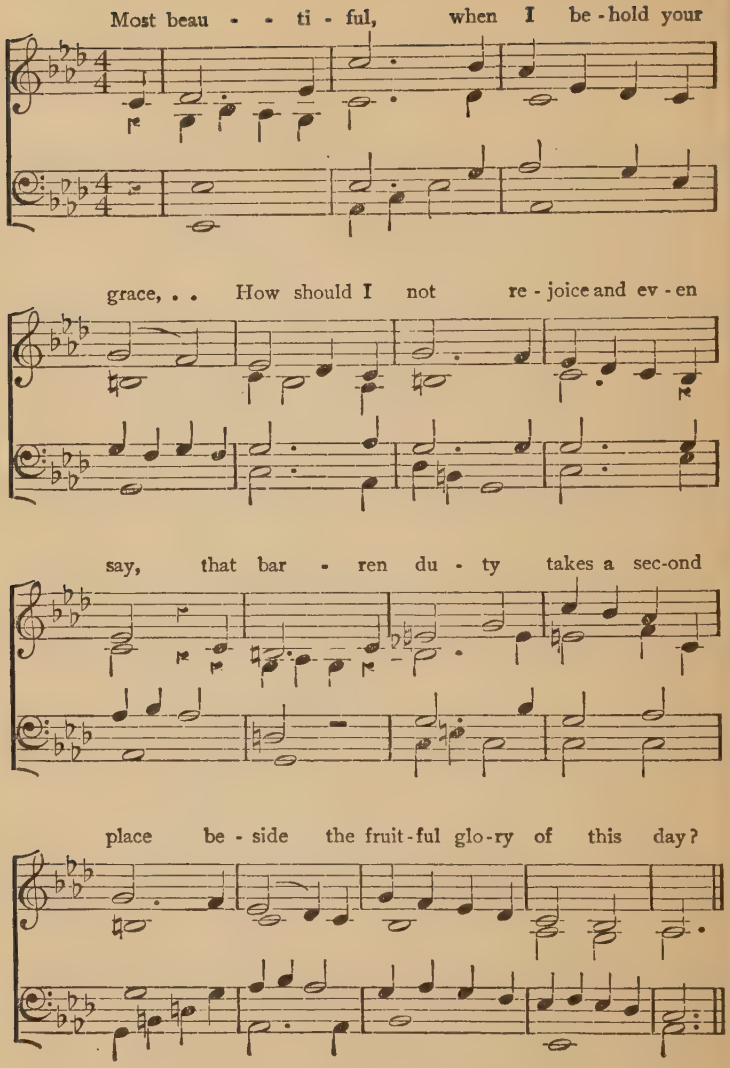
He spoke no word as he cloaked them, but the touch of his hands was a strong caress for each. And when they had murmured their thanks, he took Marco's arm and leaning upon it passed into the great hall and feasted there with the Polos sitting at his own table.

Next day, after a sojourn of seventeen years in China, they left Ta Tu, never to return. The huge cavalcade, consisting of eight hundred travellers alone, without counting the escorting troops, passed along the wide central street of the capital, under its glowing archways, through the central gateway of its massive outer wall, on by way of the suburbs, into the open country of the Chih-li plain.

Good-bye, O splendid city! When shall we see you again? August and marvellous place of enchantment, your memory must stay with us all our days and make every future vista small!

But, for Marco, the sun was in the sky and a pageant, the purpose of which he would not see, was still unrolling. He lived in the moment. He would not think of journey's end. The lady Kokachin rode beside him, and together they would ride farther in a great ship across the boundless sea. His heart sang in her company. He would love and serve her faithfully. And if his love and service could only be given in the light that she was the destined bride of another, a brighter light, that of her presence, at present shone.

"Most beautiful, when I behold your grace,
How should I not rejoice and even say,
That barren duty takes a second place,
Beside the fruitful glory of this day?"


Most beau - - ti - ful, when I be - hold your
grace, . . How should I not re - joice and ev - en
say, that bar - ren du - ty takes a sec-ond
place be - side the fruit - ful glo - ry of this day?

CHAPTER XXII

After many weeks' journey by land through China, they came to the great seaport town of Zayton.

Here the ships in which they were to embark rode at anchor in the harbour, like white dragons resting on the water. They were built of pine wood, caulked outside and in with a special preparation of lime and oil, that made them shine like snow in the sunlight. Their sails, which were lowered on the masts but never furled on deck, were of bamboo laths woven into a mat.

They were vessels far larger and finer than any known to other peoples at that time.

The biggest junk, in which the Polos and the ladies were to travel, had four decks and numerous cabins and well fitted public rooms. Decorative painted archways divided her decks and, from her mast-heads, fluttered embroidered flags and pennons of silk. Her stern was clasped by two carved dragons, which sprawled along each side and were picked out from the white background in gold and vivid colours. And on either side her bow were painted two great eyes, that she might see her way across the ocean.

Moreover, she was not only a thing of beauty, but she was essentially seaworthy. Her fastenings were all of strong iron nails, her sides were double and she was further safeguarded by having many water-tight compartments.

She carried a crew of over two hundred sailors, many of whom grew kitchen herbs and spices in wooden buckets outside their own quarters, and were accompanied by their families.

While the strenuous business of lading the ships was

conducted, the ladies and their escort stayed in the busy city and beguiled the time with various excursions. One of these took them to the neighbouring porcelain factory, where Kokachin bought a certain small incense burner of the noted white Fu-kien ware.

"For," said she, "I am minded to have sweet odours in my cabin, and something tells me I shall need them to forget the smell of Zayton."

Thus she laughed at any chance of discomfort or peril, and brought a smile even to the frightened eyes of the Princess of Manzi, who clung throughout to her lapdog. In the cabin that the two ladies were to share, a special nest of cushions was prepared for this little friend, and Marco arranged that, before their pavilion on deck, there should be a miniature terrace garden, with flowering plants in tubs and singing birds in gilded cages.

At last everything was ready for the start, at the end of the month of March.

A favourable wind, the last breath of the north-east monsoon, would carry them southwards across the China Sea. But before the sails could be braced to catch this wind, the ships had to be rowed out of the haven.

Huge oars, like masts in size, were used by as many as thirty men to each. They stood facing each other and pulled alternately on two strong ropes attached to the oars. And as they pulled, they sang their own rhythmical chant:

"Lá'la! Lá'la! Pull, brother, pull,
The sea is wide, the ship is full,
The empty sails are not less fain
For the wind than our hungry stomachs for grain!
Lá'la! Lá'la! Blow, breezes, blow,
That sails be filled and we may go
To cabin's ease without delay,
Where the women are waiting and children play!
Lá'la! Lá'la! Lá'la! Lá'la!
The work is hard, the pay is good,
Enough to buy a sailor's food,
Enough to stake, perchance to clear,
For some beautiful thing to adorn my dear!"

Then they were out and away. The oars were slung. Bells rang and orders were shouted. The men ran to the sheets and climbed the rigging like monkeys. With a following sea and a fair wind, the wide horizon lay before them across the shining open road of the sea. And the fleet of nine winged white dragons sported over the ocean, following each other, nosing the billows and flinging a foamy track in their wake.

Never was there a more charming and fantastic sight! Never was there such a prelude to so wonderful a journey!

For fifteen hundred miles they sailed west-south-west towards Cochin China.

And there was little wanting to spoil Marco's realisation of his dream, only just enough to make the constant society of Kokachin more enchanting, in that she was ever near and ever unattainable.

She indeed belonged to the sea, though she was new to it. He identified her, not with this lovely yet foreign junk, but with one of the well remembered and dearer ships of Venice. She was surely like a virgin galley, gay and brave, taking the water for the first time; a creature whose grace and beauty caught a man by the throat, a creature whom to serve could only be pure joy.

The Princess of Manzi suffered lamentably at first from sea and home sickness. But Kokachin was as happy as the days were long, alive with interest in everything new and strange: the flying fish that played at their bows, the routine of the ship's management, at once thrilling and monotonous, the stars that shone like white fire in the indigo sky of tropical nights. Marco, who had travelled this way before, delighted to explain everything to her keen and inquiring mind.

When they touched at the south-east coast of Cochin China, then known as the kingdom of Champa, he told her that the ruler of this country paid a yearly tribute of elephants to the Great Khan, in return for the consideration that had been shown to him by Kubilai, and further that the king of Champa was chiefly noted for the fact that he

had no less than three hundred and twenty-six children, of whom one hundred and fifty were grown men.

Here, and again at a group of islands called Pulo Condore, then a port of call for vessels bound to and from China, the junks took in supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables. But they could not linger, for the south-west monsoon was due to break before long.

Their course now lay due west to the present Siamese province of Ligor, in the centre of the Malay peninsula.

Here, thickly fringing the shore, were those forests, dark, mysterious and still, to which Marco had once likened the eyes of Kokachin.

"How cool and pleasant must be their shade!" she said.

"Eyes under which one might rest for ever," he murmured.

"I spoke of the trees, sir."

"Oh, ay! the trees. They are fragrant woods, for which the peninsula is famed. The people call them Sappan, but we know them in the West as brazil trees. It is hot and damp on shore, and there are many wild elephants in the forests."

They left Ligor and coasted down the peninsula southward, till at the eastern extremity of the Straits of Malacca, they reached the island of Pentam, then and long after the residence of the Malay sultans. Malacca, as a place, did not exist till about a century later, and the Polos little guessed that other Europeans, Portuguese and Dutch, were eventually to rule these lands.

Nor could they suspect how well known in the West would some day become the Strait of Singapore, through which next they went. Between the mainland and the island of Singapore on one side, and the island of Pentam on the other, they sailed a distance of some sixty miles, in such shallow water that the rudders of the junks had to be raised.

"Where shall we stop next?" said Kokachin. "It is glorious at sea, but I long to explore the strange lands we are passing."

"We are not far now from the great country called Java the Less," answered Marco. "There are two Javas, and this one is really larger than the other, but not so important, since it is wilder. The natives give it the name of Samudra" (Sumatra) "from a word of their own, meaning the sea, because the first of its many kingdoms is said to have been founded by a fisherman, who was befriended of the fairies."

Kokachin clapped her hands in glee. "Then I shall call it Samudra too, for I believe in fairies."

"No fairies are there now. I know six of the kingdoms on the north side of the country, and they have each a separate language. The coast is frequented by Saracen traders, but inland there are only savages. And though their kings call themselves subject to the Great Khan, the only tribute they send consists of occasional gifts of curiosities."

"They might have sent one fairy," said Kokachin. "We should have valued that in China."

The junks were nearing the north coast of Sumatra, when suddenly the wind changed and they were caught in the first full blast of the south-west monsoon.

Alas! white dragons, seaworthy though you were, how could your timbers stand the strain of a sea that, in a few hours, ran mountains high; of a wind that snapped your masts like matchwood and tore your wings to shreds? O wild, distracted dragons! are these the elements in which you sported? Are these dark enemies the limpid waters that once caressed you and the airs that once you breathed?

The master of the Polos' junk was killed by a falling spar. Some of the mariners were washed overboard. Their families set up a loud and continuous wailing. The terrace garden before the ladies' deck pavilion was wrecked, and painted archways crashed and broke.

The Princess of Manzi clung weeping to her lapdog and to Kokachin, who was pale but calm. Marco shut them all three into a lower cabin and took command of the ship.

After a lurid night of battling against the storm, the fleet of junks was scattered. Six of the smaller ones were never seen again, but at last Marco made junction with the two large vessels remaining, and ran for shelter to the northern coast of Sumatra.

"Shall we find a haven there?" said Niccolo, in consultation with his son.

"God knows," answered Marco. "There are many ports, but, with this head wind, we may not be able safely to enter any of them. If we can, all may be well, for the townspeople of the coast are fairly civilised, not like the natives of the interior, who are given to branding their faces and eating human flesh."

"How can we steer?" said Maffeo. "Neither the Pole Star nor the Plough can be seen now at night. It seems we have indeed come to the end of the world."

"Why then we may be the nearer Paradise," said Marco, with a grin.

"I misdoubt that, if the way thereto lies through the bellies of man-eaters," said Niccolo.

"We may escape them," answered Marco. "I have heard tell that they will only devour prisoners, who are unable to pay ransoms, and their own sick and aged relations, if so be it their sorcerers say that these are like in any case to die."

"Assuredly a very evil custom and a parlous," said Maffeo.

"Ay, that it is. It seems they first suffocate the victim and then cook him and invite all the other relations to the feast. And so they suck his very bones till not a particle of marrow remains in them. The reason is that, should such a particle remain, it might breed worms, and then, if the worms should die from want of food, the fault would lie with the dead man."

"This is no subject for jest, my son."

"It is no jest, my father. I tell you as it was told to me when I was here before, in sober earnest. They do indeed eat up their dead thus, stump and rump. And the

dry bones are then put in caskets and hidden in mountain caves." *

The risk of being cast on some wild part of the northern coast of Sumatra was, of course, carefully hidden from the ladies. But when this very thing happened, through the impossibility of finding shelter anywhere except in an estuary of the Gulf of Pasei, the precautions necessary to meet further danger could no longer be hidden.

On the shores of the wide and sluggish stream in which the three ships anchored, fine timber grew thickly, with luxuriant ferns rooted in the joints of the tree trunks. In the dense jungle behind, parrots shrieked and large butterflies, like living jewels, darted amid festoons of orchids. With the crews of the three ships, Marco landed and dug big trenches on each side, which rested at either end on the natural haven of the estuary mouth and were then fortified with stockades, to afford protection from any native attack by land. Should the cannibals approach by canoes on the river, a well-armed guard of Chinese mariners was posted on the ships.

Kokachin came out of her cabin in her man's dress of breeches, high boots and a shirt of fine white cotton, ran to the side of the ship and begged to be taken ashore to see the trenches and the stockades. She was quite sensible when the necessity for caution was explained to her, but not at all abashed.

"I like this place. Anything might happen here. How long shall we remain?"

"We cannot tell," answered Niccolo. "Only this we know, that, however great the peril here, we dare not face the open sea again till the stormy weather be past."

"And that, from what I have heard before, is like to be many months," said Marco.

* The story related by Marco was actually current then, and has been since, of many other wild tribes; in particular, according to Yule, of one in India called in a mediæval legend by the singularly inappropriate name of the Orphans, and even more strangely of the Irish.

"Then we will make our home here for a time," said Kokachin, "and learn more of this strange country."

They learned much more during the next five weary months. They learned some of the fascination and some of the horror of the unimaginable tropic East.

But throughout this time she remained gay and brave. And Marco, who at first had only known the joy of serving her, and then had experienced the keener joy of saving her and the ship, began now, during this period of waiting, to suffer. The fearful enervating climate sapped his strength. Through dreadful days, he tried to avoid her and was perpetually drawn back to her presence: through tortured nights, she was in his dreams. And he had vowed to Kubilai that he would regard her always as the destined bride of another. . . .

Presently natives, with grotesquely tattooed faces and painted bodies, did approach in canoes by the river, and were fortunately friendly, unspoilt probably by contact with any other foreigners. They brought supplies of fish, rice and coconuts, which were very welcome, and they offered red and white toddy wine, and were ready to show how they extracted the liquor from the palm trees, by cutting off a branch and attaching a pot to the stem.

Growing more familiar and enchanted with the gifts of bright coloured cloths or beads that they received in return, they offered to show the foreigners how they hunted that formidable horned beast, which Marco called the unicorn, but which was actually the rhinoceros.

Nothing would satisfy Kokachin but that she should go too.

"In the West," Marco said to her, "we have a story of the unicorn. They say it can only be snared by the lure of a pure virgin. It is attracted by the scent of her innocence and, when it comes to her subdued and lays its head in her lap, the hunters take it in the back."

"And is that what will happen now?" she asked, with wide eyes.

"No," he answered, with a short laugh; "it is not

at all like that. And yet some beasts——" He stopped and looked at her, then added, "some beasts would be happy to die so!"

They went to a marshy place where the rhinoceros was known to wallow, immersing the whole of his great body in the mud. And they saw how, when the mud heaved, revealing his hidden presence, the natives piled dry brushwood on the place, and set fire to it and roasted the sluggish monster there in his bog.

But Marco continued to wonder at the scant resemblance between those charred remains and the familiar western portrayal of the white deer-like unicorn.

On this expedition, large black hawks flew before them across open spaces, and little monkeys gibbered at them from the branches of trees. And Marco remembered that, when he had been in Sumatra before, he had seen the dead bodies of these monkeys, denuded of hair, dried, stuffed and painted, so that they resembled tiny men and were thus exported as mummified pygmies of the country.

Kokachin gathered orchids and caught butterflies and took them to the Princess of Manzi, who wore the flowers as a coronet until they faded and imprisoned the butterflies under an overturned crystal cup, until she had had time to paint them, or until they died too and lost their beauty.

Then came pestilence. The first to perish was the Princess's lapdog. It lay on a cushion, like a small rag of tawny-coloured silk for a few days, refusing food or water. Then, without fuss, in the manner of a flower or a butterfly, it expired.

The Princess was inconsolable, and even Kokachin wept when the tiny body was buried on shore. Their attendant Chinese and Mongol ladies, to whom they were like children, shook their heads and chattered together, considering the event of ill omen.

Next several of the ships' officers and many mariners were struck down with fever and sickness. Ten strong men died within one week, and the scourge continued and increased.

A frightful stench rose from the sluggish water of the

estuary. On land the poisonous swamps exhaled vapours pregnant with decay, and the dark forests brooded, baleful and implacable, beneath a sky of brass. Over that fierce sky presently the wind drove heavy clouds, which broke in furious tropical rains.

Life showed one aspect of its terrible countenance, liquid and merciless. Death, which accompanied it, came as the blessed release of sleep, with a more gentle touch. That Dark One, heralded by lightnings and thunders, stronger than fever or passion, approached and said, "Be still!"

What human being can escape the visitation of the Mightiest? Against it, what are the precautions or the prayers of man? Only, since man is one of its many seeds, can he share its power in apprehension of its Word.

Marco was able to forget himself, to realise nothing but the right relationship to his fellows. And even Kokachin took the place of a fellow being in his mind.

The safety of the ladies, who had been entrusted to them, was the first consideration of all the Polos. They made themselves personally responsible for the nourishment, the comfort, and the care of Kokachin and the Princess of Manzi. They boiled every drop of water the ladies drank. They superintended the preparation of all their food. In consultation with the intelligent Chinese on board and with the natives on shore, they learnt the secrets of potent medicaments. They burned sweet odours on every part of the ship. They forbade despair. Marco, alternately burning and shivering with malaria, made it his duty to keep the whole party free of depression. He organised entertainments and preparations for the further voyage on which they must soon start; he amused the ladies with reports of hairy tailed men who lived in the hills of the interior.

"And, indeed, it may be true, for I have heard of them elsewhere, and even in a far island of the West called England!"

He collected seeds of the brazil wood and expressed his intention of taking it back to Venice, which he did,

but, as he recorded afterwards, "Never a thing came up . . . the climate was too cold." He procured, from the west coast of Sumatra, fragrant lumps of camphor, which the Chinese, who had traded in this valued commodity, called "Icicle flakes," or "Dragon's brains."

And from the same west coast he obtained, as a change of diet, some of the flour which was ground from the pith of sago trees, and which he then had made into very palatable bread.

Thus, inspired by an impersonal love stronger than Death, he held Death at bay, and beguiled the time till they could leave the Gulf of Pasei and continue their journey westward. But where three ships had sought shelter in that estuary, only two could leave it with sufficient crews.

First Kokachin had appeared to him as the most beautiful, then as the most engaging, then as the most desirable. Now she had all these qualities and more, for, as his tried companion in misfortune, she was a friend above all others. He felt that she might even understand the temptation that oppressed him, and that temptation was relieved by the thought.

In continued stormy weather they beat up the coast of Sumatra to its north-west corner, and found shelter again in the port of Lambri, which had once given its name to the whole island as well as to the Indian Ocean.

Then, driven by the wind, they tacked northwards, passing various small islands, till after one hundred and fifty miles they came near the Nicobars.

Here the wild negrito savages, who had no king or chieftain, and who were known to the Chinese as demons, came swarming out in boats, seeking to barter ambergris and coconuts for iron. Demons indeed they looked, with their small, stark naked, black bodies, their hideous faces and red hair, their prominent teeth and their claw-like hands.

"I have heard of these people before," said Kokachin. "The Empress Jambui, who was to me like a mother, told me a story of the Lord Buddha, that he came here

once from a country called Ceylon, and stopped at one of the demon islands to bathe. Then the natives stole his clothes and the Lord Buddha cursed them; since when they have been unable to wear anything without suffering."

On this she and Marco had further conversation about Buddhism. The junks, bound for Ceylon, did not stop at the Nicobars, nor approach farther north a locality of still more evil repute, the Andaman Islands, where the Chinese mariners believed that the people had dogs' heads of frightful aspect, and were the fiercest cannibals.

Actually the Andamanese were, and still are, Oriental negritoes, mainly of interest in that they remain in the lowest state of barbarism, so near the shores of great civilised countries. The report of their cannibalism, never quite disproved but not rejected till the British settled there, was probably originally spread by traders to keep the monopoly of edible birds' nests on the islands.

For one thousand miles, they sailed a little south of west till they came to Ceylon, the great Island of Gems, where Buddhism had first flourished. Its native king was independent, though the Tamils of the Indian mainland were in possession of the northern part of Ceylon.

The gentle Cingalese people, naked but for a green handkerchief fastened with a waistband round their loins, and continually chewing betel nut, came on board the junk and offered a profusion of precious stones for sale.

Kokachin and the Princess of Manzi bought some rubies and listened with wonder to the account of one owned by the king and always carried by him when, at his coronation, he rode round his capital. It was said to be as large as a pine cone, and usually it was fixed on the top of a pagoda, but, wherever it shone, it afforded "a glorious and incomparable spectacle."

"These gems and many others abound in the mountain they call Adam's Peak," said Marco. "They are washed out of the ground by the heavy rains, and are said to be the congealed tears of the Buddha."

" Are not his miraculous footprints and his sepulchre also on that mountain ? " asked Kokachin.

" Legend fixes them there," said Marco, " but Adam's Peak is connected besides with memories of the first man. It is certainly a very holy place, venerated by Christians as well as by idolaters. But there is no reason why the Buddha should not be sacred to us, as well as to his own followers. Indeed, to those who know, he is. For, not only was he a most noble being, but our Church has taken the story of his life as that of the Christian saint Josaphat. And all who run may read that story in the History of Baarlam and Josaphat, which I remember from my boyhood." *

He told her further that, when he had been here before, he had come on a mission from Kubilai and had taken back to the Great Khan some of the relics of the Buddha, an unique tooth, a lock of hair and a certain famous alms pot.

But, when they landed to visit the Buddhist monastery at the foot of Adam's Peak and to see the great recumbent statue of the Buddha lying on a daïs inlaid with precious stones, they found on view, in an adjacent temple, another holy tooth and another sacred alms pot. Many more of the same relics were, in fact, subsequently reported from widely separate countries.

It was now found that it would be necessary to dock the junks and repair them from the ravages of the storm. As this could be done better in an Indian than in a Cingalese port, they left their course to sail west for sixty miles to the Coromandel coast, which was then known to Mohammedan merchants as Maabar, and was considered the key of Hind for trading ships both from China and the Persian Gulf.

It was a rich and magnificent country, ruled by five quarrelsome kings, the chief of whom was called Sondar Bandi Devar, the Lord of Empire.

When they reached a port not far from Tanjore on the east coast of India, crowds of the Tamil natives, wearing

* On this strange point, Yule has an illuminating note, quoting incontestable authorities and covering five large pages of small print.

nothing on their black bodies but a fold of white cotton cloth tied round the loins, came to meet them. And, when the Lord of Empire heard that the junks came from Kubilai Khan, to whom he paid tribute, he himself appeared to give them welcome, walking with bare feet over the dusty ground and, but for a loin cloth and a small turban, dressed entirely in jewels.

Round his neck he wore a chain of rubies, emeralds and diamonds, with a long pendant of large pearls ; on his arms he had gold bracelets set with sapphires, and on his legs anklets and toe rings. He was accompanied by a young slave, who carried over his head a decorated umbrella of yellow silk, and by a band of attendant noblemen, who were bound to him in life and death so completely that, when he died, they were pledged to burn themselves on his funeral pyre.

Sondar Bandi Devar had no less than five hundred wives, by whom Kokachin, the Princess of Manzi and their ladies were amiably received and entertained at Madura, the capital city of Maabar.

The treasure of the royal house (all seized a few years later by the invasions of the king of Delhi) was enormous, but a great part of the riches of southern India was at this time wasted rather horribly on the purchase of Arab horses. These were not bred in Maabar, but after importation from the West, they were first fattened with an extraordinary diet of meat, fish and oil in the stables of their new owners, and then ridden furiously without saddles or stirrups and without being properly shod, till they became thin and wretched, and finally sickened and died.

Kokachin, as a Mongol lover of horses, was horrified at this ignorant practice.

" Why do the horse merchants not supply farriers ? " she cried indignantly.

" They are Saracens and keen traders," said Marco drily, " and if the demand did not continue, the supply would cease."

But there was much more for them to wonder and to shudder at in this southern country, which has always been

the strangest and most typical part of the great Indian continent.

They gained some insight on the decadence of the ancient Hindu religion—a faith so far below the original lofty standard that it had become literal cattle worship. They saw the ox considered as a living god and the cow regarded as a sacred being. They saw the foul customs and the brutal sacrifices that such superstition must inspire.

Roaming through the city of Madura one day, Marco and Kokachin beheld a great crowd before one of the temples. Caught in the throng, they found it making way for a cart drawn by bullocks and surrounded by armed guards, Brahman priests and naked ascetics. In the cart stood a man, garlanded with marigolds and stephanotis, and daubed with filth. From a crescent-shaped knife resting on his neck hung chains with stirrups attached, and as the cart reached the temple steps, the man, with a frenzied howl, put his feet in these stirrups.

"Do not look!" exclaimed Marco, and catching his lady close, he pulled her head down on to his shoulder. But he could not tear his own eyes away from the horrid sight, when the man, whom he guessed must be a criminal, thus permitted expiation, gave a violent jerk and cut off his own head.

When they could escape from the scene, Marco was trembling as much with a tender emotion as with horror. He had held Kokachin in his arms, and that sweet moment had renewed all his desire. He could not look at her, but he heard her voice as in a dream.

"I thank you for your protection. These people are terrible, and yet they seem to have little spirit for fighting. And though some of their customs are foul, I have observed that personally they are very clean. They wash themselves twice a day, always using the left hand and keeping the right hand for food. They will never drink from another's cup, nor will they put their own lips to a cup, but hold it on high, so that the liquid falls undefiled into their mouths."

"That is the law of their Brahmans, or holy men," muttered Marco.

"Those are they who wear a cotton thread over one shoulder, tied under the other arm, are not they? I have heard that they are great sorcerers, and that they can charm the largest fish of the sea to prevent any harm coming to the men who dive for pearls off the coast of Ceylon. Also it seems the Brahmans are famed as astrologers. Nothing is done here without consulting them and considering the lucky hour and moment."

"Doubtless they have wide knowledge," said Marco. "They have a reputation for honesty and chastity—above the reputation of the Yogis or ascetics."

"A lady of the court has told me of them. They are noted as alchemists, and say that quicksilver is the mother of all minerals and sulphur the father. It seems they have the secret of prolonging life."

"Who would wish to prolong the difficulties of life?" said Marco.

They had reached the Lord of Empire's palace and paused at the entrance to the women's quarters. She laid her hand on Marco's arm with all the frankness of a boy, with all the sympathy of a perfect friend.

"Arghun Khan, my destined husband, has, they say, that wish. The alchemists of this country have lately supplied him with an elixir of life. . . . So perchance, we should do well soon to continue our journey."

They had, indeed, to leave Maabar, though he longed to travel with her indefinitely through that amazing country, to see far-famed pagodas and temples and to make the pilgrimage to the reputed site of the martyrdom of St. Thomas at Madras.

He would have taken her so gladly to the country of Telingana, north of Maabar, a country ruled then by a queen as just and well beloved as she was fair, and noted for the diamond mines of Golconda, which Sinbad the Sailor had visited long ago.

He would have taken her with joy farther inland still, and for ever through the wide world.

Instead, he had to take her to Arghun Khan. So the two junks set sail for Cape Comarin, at the southern point of India and, passing the wild and desolate shores of Travancore, inhabited chiefly by wild beasts but frequented by devotees of the virgin goddess Durga, they came to the coast of Malabar.

Here, some miles north of the modern Cananore, a spur of the southern Indian hills reaches the sea as an isolated and conspicuous promontory. This was then the separate kingdom of Eli, where Chinese ships were wont to touch. A great city, long since vanished, was situated on an estuary, which appeared as a naturally protected harbour. But when one of the junks entered this haven to prospect, she did not return.

The Polos had heard that the king of Eli was rich and hospitable, but they had not been sufficiently aware that he was a pirate, who occasionally seized and plundered ships entering the estuary.

They dared not stay to learn the fate of their companions, for the sandbanks outside the place were perilous. They dared not risk the safety of the ladies and, raising the wooden anchors that had held them for a while, they went on, steering by the Pole Star, which was once more visible at night.

North of Eli, there was now more need than ever that their single ship should move warily. For the Chinese sailors, who knew this sea, reported that native corsair vessels put out every year to cruise and prey upon merchantmen. They would spare ships and their crews to come again, but they would respect no woman, and all the riches that the Polos carried would only go to swell the loot that they obtained usually from the enormous trade in spices, copper and silk. No pirates appeared, but once more sickness broke out on the junk and, despite all precautions took a heavy toll.

Short handed and worn with anxiety, they sailed on past Malabar to the country of Guzerat, rich in the produce

of ginger, pepper, indigo and cotton, glorious in ornate architecture, but so notorious for its seafaring brigands that it would be dangerous to linger.

But, when they came near Bombay, it begame absolutely necessary to put in for supplies at the great cotton port of Thana, on the island of Salsette, where they were assured that, though the king was in league with the pirates, the people were more inclined to peaceful trade.

The Polos landed, and Marco wandered alone through the town to seek relief from the fever in his blood.

He knew that at last they were approaching the journey's end. Soon, too soon, he must fulfil his promise and deliver Kokachin as a bride to Arghun Khan of Persia, who was already taking the elixir of life to prolong his days to that end.

It could not be !

Marco's heart and soul and reason rejected the sacrifice. What was to prevent him, with all his great experience, from now turning pirate and capturing his own junk, the last survivor of the whole ill-fated expedition ? Nothing could be simpler. No one in China or in Persia could ever know that one ship had escaped. In all things, his father, his uncle, the Persian embassy, the Chinese sailors now deferred to him. He was already their chief and their leader. He had only to declare his independence wholly and roam the seas for ever, with Kokachin at his side and the Princess of Manzi, inconspicuous but happy, in the background. This would be life in its fullness !

What was to prevent it ?

In one of the hot streets of Thana, where pots of basil grew before small altars in front of the houses, where meek-eyed humped cattle, garlanded with roses, strayed at will, where the distant drone of the water-wheel sounded continually, and where the prevailing odour was of incense, rancid oil and corn, Marco saw what was to prevent his desire.

A native wedding procession moved down the street. Heralded by a row of maidens, who sang and waved their arms, heavy with gold and silver bracelets and stamped

with their bare feet, adorned with anklets and toe-rings, came a white horse, gay with multi-coloured and bejewelled trappings and with its tail and fetlocks dyed purple and green. The horse was ridden by two figures, those of the bride and groom, whose only clothing was the high cap that each wore, twisted with white flowers. Their bare limbs had the classic grace of sculptured bronze; their pose had a pagan beauty. The woman sat in front and the man crouched on the crupper, and held a naked knife at her throat. How she shrank and yet invited him! How he desired and yet threatened her!

Thus, to prove his mastery, he would take her to his home. She was his, to hold or to slay, to cherish, or to discard, his chattel, his slave, his thing!

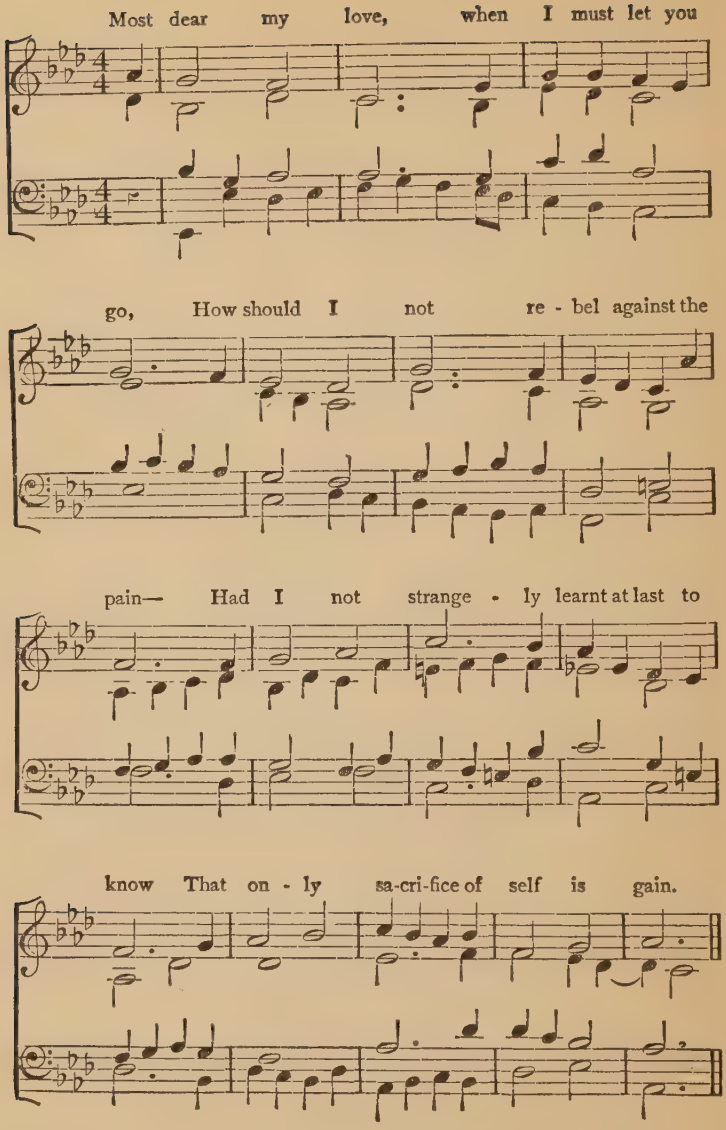
This was the primitive passion. This was the Natural Law.

Was this alone to rule Marco and his lady? Or did there already exist between him and Kokachin a finer understanding, which made them one in spirit? That spirit which returns to God Who gave it. That spirit which cannot escape the face of the living God, Whose voice speaks terribly but has uttered also the uniting Word.

The voice of God, with its two contrasting modes, making a perfect whole, suddenly was clear to Marco.

In a great revulsion of feeling, he knew that only pure love is Life, that only love crucified is triumphant, that only Jên, the Word expressing the right relationship of man to his fellows, is the Pilot of the Universe.

> "Most dear my love, when I must let you go,
> How should I not rebel against the pain?
> Had I not strangely learnt at last to know,
> That only sacrifice of self is gain."


Most dear my love, when I must let you
go, How should I not re - bel against the
pain— Had I not strange - ly learnt at last to
know That on - ly sa-cri-fice of self is gain.

CHAPTER XXIII

They left Thana and coasted Mekran, which was then included in the country of Guzerat and was considered the last province of India Minor.

India was indeed, at this time, a vague term. The known world was divided into Europe, Africa and India, or rather Asia. India Minor embraced Sind and the west coast of the peninsula, exclusive of Malabar; India Major extended from Malabar indefinitely eastward, covering even China. Abyssinia was Middle India and India Tertia comprised Zanzibar. Our modern expression the Indies is a vestige of these divisions.

The crew of the junk, depleted by disease, were now only hardened mariners, who had sailed these seas before. They told the widely known legend of the male and female islands at the extreme south of Arabia, where the sexes were always divided by a distance of thirty miles, except for one annual visit.

"The name of these two islands," they said, "is the Kingdom of Western Women."

They told also how whales were hunted with harpoons for ambergris off the large and desolate island of Socotra; how its piratical people were mixed Arabs, Indians and Greeks, and how, though they professed the Christian religion, which they had learned from Abyssinia, they attracted ships to their coast by the darkest sorceries.

Beyond Madagascar, that great and rich island of Arab traders in the far south, no ships went, they said, partly on account of strong and dangerous sea currents, but partly also because, in that mysterious region, might be encountered the colossal bird Rukh, which appeared like

a mountain aloft in the sky, which could carry elephants away in its claws, and which Marco remembered from old stories on the Rialto in Venice.

"The sound of its flight is like loud thunder," said the Chinese mariners, "and, when it is dead, men take the half of its bill and make a ship of it."

What was it really? It was reported equally from central and northern Asia, and the fossil bones of the giant aepyornis, found both there and in Madagascar, do not quite explain it. It was no invention of Sinbad or other Arab sailors, for the comparatively educated Sultan of Zanzibar believed seriously and literally in its existence up to modern times. Only its name seems to have survived in the Rook of the game of chess, and its existence may have been the personification of such dangers as waterspouts, cyclones or typhoons.

Endless and varied were the mariners' truer tales of all the Indies; of the African coast, which they knew as the Region of the Blacks, with its negro people and its particularly hideous women; of mountainous Abyssinia, where Jews were perpetually at war with Christian Nubians, and where Prester John, the real priest-king and not the legendary potentate of Asia, actually reigned; of the coast country of the Red Sea, subject to Abyssinia, but ruled by a king of the House of Solomon; of the ostriches, known here by the Chinese as camel birds.

They knew Aden as the large, treeless and waterless town it still is, and the port of Suakin, where commodities from the Far East were laden on to camels to be conveyed to the Nile, and thence were carried in boats to Cairo. Also they knew Shehr as another port, east of Aden on the Arabian coast, the residence of an Arab sultan, and a great place for the production of frankincense.

"But there is a strange thing at Shehr. No grass or forage is found there, so men and beasts alike live on small dried or fresh fish. And the houses are built of fish bones with roofs of camel hide."

"That is true," said another man. "But I would rather put in at Shehr than at Dhofar, farther east, even

though Dhofar is more fertile. There is no place like Dhofar for dirt and stench and flies and pestilence."

They came to the mouth of the Persian Gulf. They passed Kalhat on the south-eastern shore and saw, from a distance, its fine bazaars and splendid mosque. They went on for three hundred miles up the Gulf and came again to Hormuz, their port of destination.

And the first thing they heard, in that hot place where Marco had once been so ill, was that Arghun Khan of Persia, who had been drinking the elixir of life for the last eight months, was dead.

They had been hospitably received by the Prince of Hormuz, who was a vassal of the Sultan of the province of Kerman, that country bordering on Persia through which the Polos had travelled before. From the Prince of Hormuz, they heard the startling news of Arghun Khan's death, and that the throne of Persia had been seized by Arghun's brother, Kai Khatu. Meanwhile Arghun's son, Ghazan, the rightful heir, still guarded the frontier against forays by Kaidu Khan, from Kazwin to the banks of the Oxus, for this guardianship was an hereditary office, always entrusted to the heir apparent.

"But Kai Khatu will not reign long," said the Prince of Hormuz, shaking his head wisely. "He is an evil man, hated by all and particularly by one of his cousins called Baidu, who is like to rise against him."

"What of Prince Ghazan?" inquired the Polos. "Will he not claim his rights?"

"Ghazan is young but wise," said the Prince of Hormuz. "He has no love for his uncle Kai Khatu, but, as his power is not yet great enough, he will let Baidu defeat the usurper, and then perchance fall on Baidu."

What was to be done? Amid such conflict, the irrepressible Kaidu Khan, Kubilai's chief enemy, might surely seek a new ally and enlarge his power. And to meet that very contingency, the marriage between the lady Kokachin and the reigning Khan of Persia had been arranged. Was such a high matter of State now to be abandoned? If not,

then, failing Arghun, whom was the lady to wed? Was she to be handed over to the usurper, Kai Khatu, that evil man?

"Heaven forbid!" said Marco.

But, as it was impossible to learn Kubilai's will and, as undoubtedly Kai Khatu still reigned, though his tenure of the throne was insecure, it was imperative that word of their arrival should be sent to the Persian court and the question should be thereto referred.

The message was sent, and each one of the Polos trembled for the outcome. The Prince of Hormuz, however, sought to reassure them.

"Think not that Kai Khatu will want the lady for himself," he said. "He is at present too engaged to think of any new marriage, and though he already has a great harem, he has never seen this lady and therefore will not be tempted."

"If he refuses her, it will be a sore affront," said Maffeo.

"And in that case, what are we to do with her and the Princess of Manzi?" said Niccolo. "Must we conduct them back to China?"

Marco was silent. He knew—well he knew—what might happen if Kokachin were free, but he would not think of it.

"You could not wish the lady a kinder fate than that she should marry Ghazan, the son of Arghun," said the Prince of Hormuz. "He is not handsome as was his father—indeed, he is an ugly youth of small stature—but he is in all ways a better man. He is bound to succeed to the throne, for he is universally beloved. His modesty is only equalled by his talents, and all believe that he will make a just and humane ruler."

The harassed Kai Khatu sent back an answer, which, despite the insolence of its tone, brought relief by this very proposal.

"Since the embassy came from my brother Arghun," he said in effect, "it had better report to my brother's son Ghazan, who is now in Khorassan, guarding the frontier

pass between that country and the brigands of Kerman. As for the ladies, Ghazan can do with them what he pleases. They are not required by me."

The elder Polos and the ambassadors wanted to start forthwith, taking Kokachin, the Princess of Manzi and their attendant ladies.

But Marco had a word to say. Gravely he confronted them.

"Before we go," he said, "the situation must be fairly represented to the lady Kokachin, and her will in the matter must be studied. She shall not be coerced. If she wishes to go to Prince Ghazan, we will escort her and deliver her safely. But if she fears this end or has any objection to it, I myself will take her and the Princess of Manzi back to China, while the embassy goes on to make due report, after which my father and my uncle can proceed home to Venice."

The ambassadors demurred. Kokachin was too young to understand so grave a question. A maiden barely twenty years old—how should she be able to judge?

"She is a woman by experience," said Marco, "and I will not let her be married to any man against her will, whatever the reason."

Niccolo and Maffeo agreed.

"It is true," said the one, "she is dear to me as my own daughter, and it is only right that her wishes should be consulted."

"She is indeed a fair and a gallant maid," said the other. "And even if Prince Ghazan be worthy of her, she is the one to judge whether he be given the chance."

So they requested a formal interview of Kokachin and, when it was granted, they all went in to the apartment in the palace of the Prince of Hormuz where the ladies were installed.

The bare, windowless room was comparatively airy from the ventilators which, as in all the houses of Hormuz, projected through the outer walls like funnels to catch and cool whatever wind that blew. Kokachin, who had cut short her long hair, in order the better to bear the fearful

heat of the place, had, at the same time, discarded her man's clothing, and appeared now, pale and tense, in a clinging dress of thin silk. The Princess of Manzi was sick of a fever and was not present, but Kokachin was attended by two of her Mongol ladies, and indeed looked already like a young queen holding her court.

While the situation was fairly represented to her, Marco stood and watched her, longing and dreading to hear the fate that she must pronounce.

And after all, he might have known what she would say. She was a great lady, as the Polos were great gentlemen. She could not think of herself. The marriage that had been arranged between Arghun Khan and herself was never a matter of choice, but a grave affair of State: its purpose to cement the alliance between China and Persia. The fact that Arghun Khan was dead could make no difference to such a policy. If Ghazan, the rightful heir, was also the destined ruler, no consideration of his personal character or appearance, no fear on her own account could affect the issue.

"I am ready to carry out the wish of Kubilai Khan," she said. "Take me to Ghazan and, by Heaven's help, he and I together will rule justly in Persia, to the further glory of the Mongol Empire!"

Their departure from Hormuz and its insufferable climate was not further delayed. Their numbers, depleted from the original company of eight hundred to one hundred by the disasters of the voyage, was still sufficient for them to form one large caravan to cross the burning Hormuz desert northwards.

Here, as the Polos had done before, they escaped the scorching poisonous wind and came into the fertile plain beyond. Then on they went, over the mountain pass, taking every precaution against the brigands of the country, to the farther plain, and the neighbourhood of walled and fortified villages.

Here they were overtaken by a fearful dust storm, the darkness of which they could only ascribe to supernatural

agency. And when, in that confusing, choking darkness, they were suddenly attacked in great force, by the lurking bandits, who swept down upon them, riding abreast and uttering demoniacal howls, they believed that the magical art and ferocity of these people would be their end. The caravan was thrown into confusion. Many men and beasts were struck down and slain on the spot. Other men and women, shrieking for mercy, were caught up on the saddle bows of the brigands and carried off.

The Polos were the only ones to keep their wits, and, as usual, Marco's first and only thought was for the safety of Kokachin. He fought his way to the side of the litter, where she and the Princess of Manzi rode together and where a desperate band of faithful defenders struggled against the robbers. Kokachin herself was armed with bow and arrows, and was kneeling up in the litter, shooting into the midst of the fray.

"There is a village not far away," shouted Marco. "If we can reach it, we are saved!"

And, while his father and uncle brought up followers to protect the litter, he headed a band to be hurled against the attackers, and succeeded in diverting their attention.

It was then a case of fighting a rearguard action, so that the litter might reach the village. As they approached the walled place, the inhabitants, constantly at war with the roving free-booters, threw open their gates and came to their assistance.

It was barely in time. The elder Polos gained shelter with their precious charge and only six other men of their company. Marco, himself wounded, staggered in later with seven more. And throughout that dreadful day the village was besieged, till the evening brought a wind that dispelled the "magical darkness" and with it the besiegers.

Then the Polos realised what had happened. Of the company that had left China eight hundred strong, eighteen alone were left to arrive in Persia. Of these eighteen two were the ladies, mercifully unscathed, four were the original ambassadors, and three were the Polos themselves.

The nine remaining were all that were left of their attendants.

"It is well done," cried Kokachin, with all the hardihood of her race. "Nine is our lucky number. Twice nine is doubly lucky! Therefore the omen is good! Let us on to Ghazan!"

Their troubles were not over, but her unfaltering courage was their inspiration.

They collected a fresh caravan of men and animals from this and other villages, and continued over the next great mountain pass in bitter cold, till they reached the province of Kerman. Then they crossed the great salt desert to Kuhbenan, carrying all food and water for a week.

And at Kuhbenan at last, Prince Ghazan, having had word of their approach, sent a strong relieving escort to meet them from the frontier post he occupied near Damaghan. The escort brought letters of welcome from the prince, rich presents and comforts for the ladies and sorely needed supplies for the further journey to Tebbes and Damaghan.

The responsibility of the Polos was over and, from the tone of Ghazan's letters, they could not but feel that he was a man to be trusted. He excused himself courteously but frankly, in the manner of a soldier, for not coming in person to meet this honoured embassy from his great-uncle Kubilai Khan. His duty on the frontier must take precedence of his personal inclinations.

"On the word of a Mongol, I desire only to love and serve faithfully those ladies, who were destined to the court of my father. And if one of those ladies in particular, namely, the Princess Kokachin, will on my reputation overlook my defects sufficiently to trust me with her hand, I will cherish and honour her all the days of my life. Her condescension in coming to me deserves my humble and undying gratitude."

Prince Ghazan further invited the Polos to accompany the ladies to the end.

They went on to the frontier encampment in the neighbourhood of the Arbre Sec. They were received there

with the most impressive welcome, and could have no doubt that their charge was delivered into worthy hands.

Ghazan himself was a Mongol aristocrat, combining the best influence of Persian civilisation with the natural hardihood of his race. He should be a fit mate for Kokachin, for he was only a few years her senior, and his small stature and plain but honest face did nothing to detract from the prepossessing manliness of his demeanour.

After the Polos had rested and had been entertained for some time, the day came at last when they must go. They were to be speeded on westward to the Persian court of Ghazan's uncle, Kai Khatu, for Ghazan was not yet officially at war with the usurper, but was biding the time till that usurper should be overthrown by other hands. When this happened, as it certainly would before long, Ghazan would seize his opportunity and the throne.

The treasures that they had brought from China had been sent on direct by ship through the Persian Gulf to be reclaimed by them in Syria. Now it was supplemented by further gifts from Ghazan, who also supplied everything needful for their journey homewards.

They had only now to take their leave of him and to bid farewell for ever to Kokachin and the Princess of Manzi.

That little lady, the last frail flower of the Sung dynasty, had marvellously survived her transplanting and its many trials, and indeed seemed, with a strange adaptability, to gain new strength from finding herself once more in comparatively civilised surroundings. All she needed was to remain near Kokachin. She owed her fortitude to that beloved companion and, like some fair parasite drawing life from the creature to which it clings, she had not really suffered.

The endurance of Kokachin had been more severely tested. She was still strong, she would be strong to the last, she would break rather than bend—something within her broke now. . . .

She received the Polos regally, standing at Ghazan's side, wearing the robes and hood of a Mongol matron and

the graceful Botta head-dress. But her face was pale as death, and her eyes were shadowed with pain. She took the hands of Niccolo and Maffeo and could not speak.

"Dear lady," said Niccolo, "we have brought you here through sore tribulation, which only your courage has sustained. We leave you now in good keeping, with our blessing to support you for the rest of your days."

"God keep you and bide with you, dearest lady," said Maffeo gruffly. "You have been like a star in our sky, and you will yet be the brightest jewel in your husband's crown."

Suddenly she bowed her head and leant against Niccolo's breast. "I cannot bear that you should leave me," she cried. "I cannot bear it." And she broke into passionate weeping.

Old Niccolo put his arms around her.

"Why now, little lady, what is this? Come, Kokachin, my pretty, my queen that is to be! There, then, cry if you will! I understand—it is the long strain! Such a journey as it has been—such perils as you have withstood! They would unnerve the strongest."

While he held her, like a tender father, and tried to dry her tears, Ghazan spoke to Maffeo.

"Need you go? Stay with us, stay always! Her happiness is the only thing I desire."

"We must go, sir," said Maffeo. "We love her dearly, and it will be best for her, and for us."

Her storm of emotion passed. She embraced Niccolo like a child. She turned to Maffeo and embraced him too, and only her still trembling lip showed the grief that she was controlling. Then she gave her hand into the gentle clasp of Ghazan and lifted her head and met his gaze with a smile and allowed him to lead her to a seat.

Marco, who had stood behind his father and uncle, came forward and knelt at her feet.

"Fare you well, my lady," was all that he could say. But his heart cried, "Most beautiful and beguiling—most dear my love, is this indeed the end?"

She answered him, "Fare you well, my lord."

And all there wondered to hear her use to Marco that word she only owed to Ghazan.

She took from one of her attendant ladies a small object wrapped in silk and, removing the covering, showed the incense burner of white Fu-kien porcelain, that she had bought long since at Zayton. She put it into Marco's hands.

" This still holds the sweet savour of our journey," she said. " Keep it in remembrance of me."

" I will keep it," said Marco.

And he thought of the legend of the unicorn and of how the mythical beast may be subdued by the odour of innocence. Then the legend seemed to him true after all. For the fragrance of the incense calmed his passion, and he could remember nothing but the Word, which united for ever his spirit with the spirit of his lady.

" Keep it well," she said. " For when I am gone, in a little time I shall be forgotten. But when you are gone, this one small gift may still be cherished in memory of a brave man."

" I will keep it well," said Marco.*

She laid her hands on his shoulders.

" I thank you, my lord," she said. " For all your patience, for all your service, for all your love, I thank you and will ever remember."

" I thank you, my lady," he answered. " For a wonderful journey and for those words."

Then she put her cold lips to his forehead. And he whispered, " God bless you ! " as a prayer, and rose up and went away.

She lived another year, long enough to see her husband, Ghazan, regain his throne and become Khan of Persia. Then, alone, she left this world on a further and more wonderful journey.

* An incense burner of white Fu-kien porcelain, once the property of Marco Polo, may still be seen at the Louvre Museum in Paris.

CHAPTER XXIV

During the last twenty-four years, many faces had vanished from the old Ca' Polo in Venice.

The venerable Ser Andrea had been gathered to his fathers. The sad Madonna Fiordelisa, wife of Niccolo Polo, had been laid to rest. Alas!

> "Pleasure of love lasts but a little hour,
> Its taste all sweetness and its dregs all sour . . .
> Who, having drained the cup, would not forget,
> In dreamless sleep, both rapture and regret?"

In place of the lemon-faced seneschal, his son controlled the household. There still remained that good dame, who had been the foster-mother of Marco and had also nursed the child of Fiordelisa, the bambino Maffeo. But even she was now ancient and crabbed, and young Maffeo, a serious man of nearly twenty-five, with all the responsibility of the family's central business on his shoulders, did not pay her any heed.

Uncle Marco had come back to Venice from Soldaia some time before, had made a will, and had then died. His will stated that if his brothers, Niccolo and Maffeo, returned they were to be his sole trustees and executors. But in case of their continued absence, he nominated his sister-in-law Fiordelisa and one of her relatives. Fiordelisa did not survive him long, and the property that he had bequeathed passed to his own son and daughter, who remained in the Crimea.

Maffeo the younger was therefore, at this time, the sole representative of the family in Venice.

He believed that his father and his other uncle must now be dead, and that if his step-brother Marco still lived,

he must have settled in a new home somewhere at the end of the earth. The story of the elder Polos' first journey, their extraordinary return and their second departure with Marco was still told. But no one thought they would come back again. No one, except that crabbed dame, the old nurse.

"I shall live to see Marco once more," she persisted. "He was always an adventurer, that one! Did he not venture, from the hour of his birth, when his sainted mother died? He is a true son of Venice. The lagoons will call him home, and maybe he will venture again."

Young Maffeo shrugged his shoulders and attended only to the business of the day.

And at last, on a summer evening, three bearded and dark skinned strangers arrived in the courtyard of the Ca' Polo and knocked on the wooden door. They were oddly attired in long, dirty and rather ragged coats of black quilted cotton. Two, who appeared to be the elder, wore high helmet-shaped caps of Persian lamb, and the third wore a round fur-edged hat, adorned with a coral button and a heron's plume. All carried staves, and curved scimitars in damascened sheaths were strapped to their sides. One led a large dog of ferocious aspect, and another held a small casket of black-wood.

A serving-man opened the door and the strangers spoke to him. He denied them admittance till he had reported to the seneschal, and they laughed long and loud. Presently the seneschal came, and there was further altercation. Various members of the household collected to see the vagrants. Loiterers from the street drifted into the courtyard to watch and wonder.

Young Maffeo was taking his evening meal in the terrace loggia that overlooked this scene. Offended with the noise below, he rose from his table and came to the open front of the loggia, carrying a wine-glass in his hand. He saw the man who carried the black-wood casket, sitting in the most familiar way possible on the edge of the stone cistern in the centre of the courtyard, and drawing off his long heavy boots.

The second man was still standing before the doorway, arguing with the seneschal and gesticulating violently. The third man with the dog, leaned against the portico, immediately below the loggia and, in an unconcerned pose, hummed a song.

Then young Maffeo, half irritated, half amused by the behaviour of these intruders, whom he judged from their eccentric attire to be foreigners, and from their importunity to be drunkards, gently tipped the contents of his wine-glass on to the head of the fellow beneath him.

The man looked up with the red liquor running down his face, scowled, licked and smacked his bearded lips, then smiled and shouted genially, "Well, that's one way for a son to give the loving cup of welcome to his father!"

Assuredly the speaker must be drunk, though his utterance was clear enough. Drunk or grossly impertinent!

Really angry now, young Maffeo cried, "Turn them out, seneschal. Clear the court. We have had enough of this!"

But suddenly there was renewed uproar. The old nurse darted out from behind the seneschal, ran to the figure seated on the cistern, flung herself on her knees at his feet, and clasped him in her arms.

"It must be—it is, my own Ser Marco!" she shrieked. "O blessings on this day! O thanks be to all the saints who have brought you back! Though none know you again, how should I fail you—I, old Maria, whose breasts gave you suck? You have not changed since then. I swear you have not changed!"

He raised and embraced her. She laughed, she wept, she stormed. She drove the gaping crowd away. She rushed at each of the other men in turn and kissed their hands. She led them in, alternately vociferating blessings on their heads and curses on the household.

Niccolo Polo's large Chinese dog, the only alien there, added to the hubbub by expressing, in his own manner, his detestation of all foreign devils.

Like all men of great experience, they did not at first talk easily of their adventures. For this reason, even when they were recognised in their own home, the excitement of their return, though it extended to their business house and thence throughout the city, soon waned.

They did not mind. They were more prepared to be interested in the affairs of Venice, than Venice was prepared to be interested in them. They had learned long since the art of adaptability.

There was naturally some curiosity as to the extent of the wealth they had collected in the Far East. They shrugged their shoulders and replied that they had not done badly.

Then young Maffeo, whose shame at his reception of his father had made him more serious than ever, began to gaze wonderingly at the troop of foreign slaves, who came to the house from the Polos' ship, moored at the quay, carrying an incredible amount of baggage. This certainly pointed to the accumulation of much property.

But it was all very confusing. Neither his father, his uncle, nor his step-brother would discard the old, travel-stained garments in which they had arrived and, while they superintended the disposal of their bales, chests and live stock, it was useless to question them. The courtyard was soon stacked with luggage, and Niccolo grudgingly vouchsafed that this was nothing to the amount that would be stored in their warehouses.

A strange, long-haired ox, which young Maffeo heard was called a yak, was lodged in a stable. A kennel was contrived for the fierce dog. Perches were temporarily arranged in the terrace loggia for a large number of hawks. The Ca' Polo became like a menagerie, a fair, a new Tower of Babel, and was the focus of attention for all Venice, which regarded such eccentricity as a rare jest.

After some time, Niccolo abruptly announced his intention of giving a feast to celebrate his return. All old friends residing in Venice were to be invited. It was to be a great occasion.

The banquet was held in the large upper room, and was

perfect in every detail, but not remarkable for any unusual extravagance. Fresh rushes were strewn on the tesselated floor, flowers and fruit decorated the tables, baked meats in abundance were served, and choice wines brimmed in every glass. Over one hundred guests were entertained, and many more would have liked to be bidden. All wore gala dress, and compliments flowed freely.

Niccolo, Maffeo the elder and Marco had at last consented to attire themselves decently, and appeared dressed alike in robes of crimson satin, which, though not quite in the fashion of the day, were sufficiently splendid. A lady noted for her beauty sat next to Niccolo and, having dipped her white fingers into the bowl of scented water that a servant handed from guest to guest, she allowed her host to wipe them on a soft cotton napkin.

"What luxury!" she sighed coquettishly, for the amenity of table linen was then unknown in Venice, and wet or gravy stained hands were dried on silken garments. "Methinks," she added, allowing her fingers to linger in Niccolo's clasp, "that such gentle habits must come from overseas, together with your gorgeous raiment."

"You like my coat, lady?"

"I have never seen richer satin or so fine a colour."

"It should become you," he replied.

Rising, he removed the garment, slashed it with his knife from neck to hem and, to the sound of her exclamations, draped one half across her lap and the other round her shoulders, where it indeed adorned her creamy skin and flame-red hair.

As though at a signal, Maffeo the elder and Marco also rose then, took off their crimson robes, and handed them to servants, who cut them into strips which they distributed among the guests.

What odd generosity! Amid laughter and thanks, the three gentlemen left the room and presently reappeared in still finer robes of crimson velvet. They walked round the table displaying themselves and calmly accepting the congratulations of their friends.

"Who could value satin when possessing such velvet?"

" It is magnificent ! "

" It would grace any festival."

" Messer Maffeo, you should surely have your portrait painted in that kingly garb."

" Messer Marco, if you appear on the Piazetta thus attired, the women will never leave you alone ! "

" Messer Niccolo, you outshine your son ! "

They divested themselves of the velvet robes, solemnly cut the garments into wide pieces, which the servants again distributed, and left the room.

There was now some excitement. Ladies snatched the rich strips from one another, compared the value of satin and velvet, chattered like magpies. Men called for more wine to toast the lavish givers, and murmured between themselves that this was a strange game, and what was its meaning ?

The game became stranger. Niccolo, Maffeo and Marco reappeared, wearing those dreadful, old, travel-stained coats of black quilted cotton. They were greeted with roars of laughter. This, then, was the point of the joke. The Polos, having given away all their fine clothes, were now reduced to the garb of penury.

But gravely they walked round the table again, displaying their poor raiment as though it were cloth of gold. The guests entered into the spirit of the prank.

" Messer Niccolo, you are magnificent ! I swear you will set the fashion ! "

" Messer Maffeo, no wonder you despise silk and velvet, possessing a coat so fine ! "

" Messer Marco, when you have done with this dress, let me have it ! "

Once more they took off the coats and ripped up the seams. It was grotesque. Was every one now to be presented with a rag ? The fair ladies rocked with mirth. The men guffawed politely, and felt that the joke was after all a poor one. But servants were hurrying, with trays and dishes, to collect something that fell from the torn seams of quilted cotton. And, having filled the trays and dishes, they were marshalled and led by the Polos from guest to

guest. Before each guest was laid a precious stone from the store that had been hidden in those seams; a pearl, a diamond, a ruby, or an emerald, each stone a perfect specimen and a gift beyond price.

Then it was realised that the Polos had returned from their far enterprise as multi-millionaires. Then Venice began to understand their value.

And Maffeo the younger, who had blushed for the eccentricity of his relations, was the first to agree that the menagerie, the fair, the Tower of Babel should be removed to more commodious surroundings, in a new house, that came to be known as the Corte del Millione.

Marco's heart still ached from the loss of his lady. And life now held no interests to heal the wound. Venice was small after China and the whole of the glowing East. Flattery was empty after the honours he had known. He did not despise the adulation of his own people, but he still longed for the Company of the Free, and failed to find it again on the Rialto.

All these merchants and seafarers were so fettered by their worship of wealth, so far below the mark in the marvellous tales they recounted. And they had never travelled far enough to lose the idea that their own country was the centre of the world.

Marco belonged to those of European nationality and had nothing in common with them; neither with Italians of various cities, with Greeks, with British, with French, with Germans. He had more sympathy with alien Russians, who reminded him of the Mongols, with dark-skinned, silent Arabs, with Persians, or with actual Tartar traders. And to these he was a foreigner, stranger than most in that he knew both West and East, which cannot meet.

But one day, as though he must needs make a friend of one of them, he purchased from a Venetian captain a Kipchak slave, who became his personal and devoted attendant. He would not call the man by his own outlandish name, but said he should be known as Peter.

"For," said he whimsically, "having charge of my

property, you shall have the keys of heaven and of hell."

And Peter the Tartar, who remained with him from henceforth and seemed to him a link with other days, was specially mentioned in a will he made in after years.

Now Venice was still at war with Genoa. One year before the Polos had come home, Genoese vessels had been seized by a Venetian fleet, but since then, the Genoese, in league with the Greek Emperor of Byzantium, Michael Paleologus, had been triumphant on the Bosphorus and were gradually gaining the upper hand.

Fighting continued up and down the seas, till at last the Genoese, strong enough to make a great bid for supremacy, sent forth a fleet of seventy war galleys, under command of their noted captain-general, Lamba Doria, who having touched at Messina, steered for the Adriatic. This fleet was dispersed by a storm, but, reuniting on the Albanian coast, began there to plunder Venetian property, and reaching the island of Curzola, took it and burned its chief town.

Venice was roused to fury. The Mistress of the Adriatic knew how to defend her sea. Her admiral, Messer Andrea Dandolo, was given a fleet, which, when joined by other galleys from the ports of Dalmatia, showed a total number of ninety-five great ships.

Marco Polo obtained the command of one of these, and found that life was still worth while.

It was the first glorious hour he had known since he had parted from his lady. He was young again, a boy, hearing the voices of wind and water calling, feeling at one with the Winged Creatures to be seen on or from the Piazetta.

It was the realisation of all his dreams. For he had identified Kokachin with a virgin galley, gay and brave, and now that ship was his to possess and to control, his bride, his precious charge, a living thing, most dear and lovely.

With the other splendid war galleys, painted like them in gold, vermilion and azure, flaunting like them her

flags and pennons, sounding like them martial music of drums and trumpets and hautboys, she sallied forth from the harbour.

She had a large castle amidships, elevated above the rowers' benches. Her battery of mangonels and great crossbows was at the bow and, along her gunnels, between the benches, were smaller cross-bows. Her rowers were freely enlisted men and her company numbered about two hundred and fifty men, including officers.

On a September evening, the Venetian fleet neared Curzola and sighted the Genoese. After a council of war, it was decided that attack should be deferred till the following morning, but that a sharp look out should be kept, lest the enemy should steal away under cover of darkness.

Nothing was farther from the thoughts of the Genoese, who were, in fact, making the same plan.

At dawn on the next day the attack was therefore mutual. Both fleets connected their galleys with hawsers and linked their oars. Both fleets rushed upon each other like two leviathans. The Venetians, with the wind in their favour but the morning sun in their eyes, made the more impetuous onslaught.

There was frightful slaughter and confusion. Ships, aflame from molten pitch and burning tow, were cut adrift to blaze alone like funeral pyres. The dead were cast into a sea foul with wreckage. The wounded lay and cried where they fell. By noon, the Venetians had captured ten Genoese galleys and had taken great numbers of prisoners. But still the battle raged.

Marco, pierced by a shaft through the shoulder, cheered on his men and was unconscious of any hurt. Like his compatriots, he was beyond himself, wild with enthusiasm, frenzied with joy of combat.

Suddenly he realised that some of the Venetian galleys had run aground on the sand banks of Curzola, that the enemy had seized one of them and, having cleared her of her crew, were confounding his flank by turning her upon it. At the same time the Genoese in front were forming closer column and advancing boldly. And a moment later

the look-outs gave notice that fresh enemy ships were to be seen approaching from the distance.

Panic ran through the Venetian line like lightning.

Before Marco knew what would happen, they were encircled.

But still he fought. Like a wounded lion at bay, calling his men to remember their own winged lion of San Marco, he fought, with his right arm hanging useless and his sword in his left hand. He strove to perish. His ship, his darling, was already dying. Her decks and gunnels ran with blood. Her castle was a wreck. Her fair flags hung in tatters or lay in shreds. Her bow was burning. She was dying horribly, and he wanted nothing but to die too.

It was not permitted to him. By the afternoon, the Genoese had gained a complete and crushing victory. His sinking ship was boarded and, while several men fell on him and held him fast, an enemy officer cried, " Yield, noble Venetian ! " and took his broken sword.

Nearly every Venetian galley, including the flagship, was captured, and seven thousand prisoners, among whom were the Admiral Dandolo and Marco Polo, were taken. In the barbarous fashion of those days, the prisoners, whether wounded or not, were heavily chained. During their dreadful transfer to Genoa, many died and were cast into the sea.

Old Messer Dandolo, seeing the sufferings of his countrymen and conscious of his own disgrace, felt his heart break. In his anguish, he refused all food and finally, a prey to madness, dashed his head against a rower's bench till life left him.

Marco, who saw this happen, knew that he himself had lost everything except his reason. His lady, his ship, his freedom—all were gone, and even reason wavered as, with his festering wound, he thought feverishly, " Is this the fellowship of man ? Rivalry and war, bloodshed and torture, despair and ruin, where is God that such things should be ? "

Genoa rejoiced exceedingly in her triumph. The prisoners of war, who were its immediate evidence, were lodged in various gaols, and Marco found himself with others incarcerated in the basement of a large Palazzo.

Here were already quartered a certain number of Pisans, who had been taken in a war with Genoa, fourteen years previously, and who now greeted the Venetians with the most gloomy forebodings. Though peace had been made between Genoa and Pisa ten years previously, it had proved abortive, and these wretched captives were the forgotten remnant of several thousands who had died of disease and want.

The prison was as foul and crowded as any place of its kind in the Middle Ages.

Marco surveyed his surroundings. He had occupied many stranger dwellings, but never one so miserable.

A fellow captive dressed his wound, and they entered into conversation.

Marco began to talk, as he had never talked before, about his past experiences. A group collected round him to listen and to wonder. While he talked, they forgot disgrace and misery. It was as though the magic of his voice set them free. The amazing story he told dispelled the prison walls and led them far afield.

He forgot the present, he did not think of the future. There was no voice to tell him, as the dreary days went by, that this defeat was not conclusive for Venice, that, in a year's time, she would conclude an honourable peace with Genoa, and that he and all other prisoners would thereupon be set free. Then he would enjoy a greater reputation than ever. Then he would go home to find his father (that irrepressible old Niccolo) married again; his rather lame excuse that he feared Marco might never return, and that consequently he must make certain of another heir! Then, bearing no malice, he would find in a fair Venetian lady, a mate for his own still ripe manhood and would leave to her and to three daughters, the only offspring of that union, the bulk of his property.

He could not guess any of these things. He did not consider himself at all.

But he dwelt in the golden past and, for the relief and entertainment of his fellows, he told his story.

And soon, not only all the prisoners but the gaolers too gathered round him to listen and to wonder. And the news went through Genoa that there were strange and marvellous tidings to be heard from a captive gentleman of Venice, in the basement of that old Palazzo. In fact, it was said, jestingly, that there was nowhere so free a company as these prisoners, who were following the wanderings of Messer Marco Polo through the wide world.

Then various notables of Genoa came also to hear and inquire. And some brought their friends, and some brought their ladies—light and lovely ladies, free for such an adventure, but ready to learn of further freedom.

Soon Marco Polo was treated with honour and distinction.

When his veracity was questioned, he laughed and said: "If I should talk for ever I could not tell one half of what is true!"

Then they would beg him to continue, and finally, through influential acquaintances, he sent to Venice for all those notes and memoranda that he had made during his travels, to refresh his memory.

There was, among the prisoners, a certain gentleman of Pisa, by name Rustichello (or Rusticien), who had travelled in the suite of Prince Edward of England to the Holy Land with the Crusaders, and had, from a book in the possession of his patron, compiled an abridged and combined manuscript of the Stories of the Round Table. He consequently claimed some literary ability, but was, in fact, a simple though industrious man, without much method. He listened now to Marco Polo with the rest, and his wonder was modified by the conviction that here was a finer story than any he had heard before, and that only his genius could give it to the world. He procured writing materials and induced Marco to dictate to him.

But the result of his labours, only revealed after many

years, was then universally doubted, and only gained credence eventually through a greater modern scholar.

"Wait," said Messer Rustichello. "Before you start, Ser Marco, I must first indite the preamble I have used before to introduce a marvellous tale. Here is my ink-horn! My quill is newly cut! A fair sheet of vellum, and I am ready. . . . Now, listen and say whether these are not worthy words:

"Great Princes, Emperors and Kings, Dukes and Marquises, Counts, Knights and Burgesses! and People of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of the various races of mankind and of the diversities of the sundry regions of the World; take this Book and cause it to be read to you. For ye shall find therein all kinds of wonderful things . . ."

"A very fair and noble opening," said Marco Polo. "And when we have finished, let us simply say, 'Thanks be to God! Amen! Amen!'"

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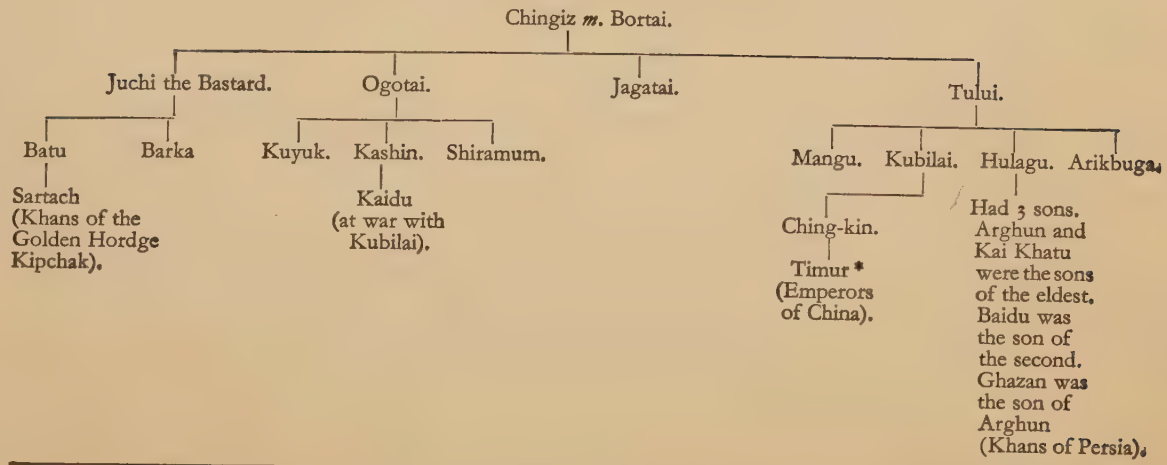
The story of the Wood Carver, Chapter VI, is based on a Chinese legend of Kuan Yin given by Léon Wieger; and the story of the Companion of Travellers, Chapter VII, was suggested by a Chinese story of the eighteenth century given by the same authority.

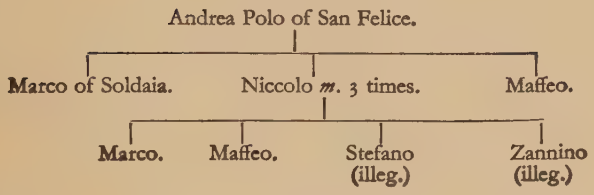
My thanks are due to Miss Ruth Wingate for assistance with the music on pp. 238, 258.

Genealogy of the Mongol Khans.



* Not to be confused with Timur the Terrible, who lived in the fifteenth century and was a descendant of Jagatai.

GENEALOGY OF THE POLOS



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